University of Alberta

Connectedness and Health for First Nation Adoptees

by

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative studies that involve First Nation adoptees in a Canadian context are limited. Reports that focus on Aboriginal children in care of public agencies emphasize the importance of the child remaining connected to family and community. The literature on adoption describes *connectedness* as an attribute of self, which reflects our interpersonal relationship with the world. A sense of *disconnection* can be the underlying motive for unhealthy behaviours, mental and emotional problems and high-risk activities, which lead to a variety of health problems. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between connectedness and health for First Nation adult adoptees. The objectives are to: (1) describe how connectedness relates to health for First Nation adoptees, and (2) explore legislative, policy and program implications in the adoption of First Nation children.

The Western theoretical framework that informs this research study is the Human Ecological Framework, which suggests that a variety of interrelated factors in our environment play a role in our health. Indigenous scientific theories also are applied in the analysis of the findings. Western qualitative research methods are utilized in concert with Aboriginal ways of sharing knowledge through ceremony, prayer, story and relationships.

The findings suggest that, for First Nation adoptees, there is a causal relationship between connection to birth family, community and ancestral knowledge, adoption and health. A theory on spiritual loss that is unique to First Nation adoptees is developed by applying the grounded theory method. A secondary outcome is the advancement of human ecological theory from an Aboriginal perspective.

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Where does one begin with these? I have so many people to thank. I will begin in the appropriate place for myself – and that is my Creator. I once said that it was so good to know what your purpose in life is. I believe that part of my work here on earth is to advance the knowledge on Aboriginal adoption. I believe and thank the Creator for putting me in this place, giving me strength to persevere and *connecting* me with the people who have made a difference in my life and who have helped me move toward a better understanding of Aboriginal adoption.

I want to thank my adoptive mother, Alice, and my adopted father, Philippe, for their unconditional love. They took me into their home and hearts, and in my darkest moments, their love gave me the courage to go on. Simply said, they believed in me.

I want to thank my birth mother, Adeline, who gave me my name, Jeannine – a name that I still carry proudly. Her life was shortened by the pain of losing her children to the child welfare system, and I hope that through this study, she can rest in peace now. I also am grateful for the brothers and sisters she gave me.

I thank my children. My daughter, Robin, continues to amaze me as a strong, beautiful woman and mother. I thank God that through my reconnection to our family and ancestors, she knows who she is and where she comes from. I am grateful for my son, Josh, who has been a wonderful gifted addition to our family, and his birth parents whom we do not know yet.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Personal Vignette – An Introduction to Research

> There were 12 women in the sweat lodge, sitting side by side, transferring an incredible energy of connection, power and spiritual sisterhood. During the course of the four rounds, I felt many emotions. I was grateful for the darkness as I wept for all the hardships we have suffered and shared as a people. Once, for a fleeting moment as I prayed for pity from my Creator, I felt a light touch on my feet and thought someone had accidentally brushed against me. The next time the door flap went up, I realized no one sat near enough to have touched my feet. When darkness submerged us once again into a world of only song and prayer, one of my grandmothers spoke to me. I knew she was with me and caressed my feet. I sang loudly to the beat of the drum and realized I had an obligation to fulfill. I needed to write about the experiences of my people and something to do with the connection I have with my ancestors. I looked across the lodge and felt the presence of a strong circle of women, including my PhD advisor. My research had begun. (Carriere, 1999)

While it is important for me personally and professionally to undertake research that is valid and makes a contribution to the field of knowledge on First Nation adoption, I also see my research as a spiritual process. If I am to explore the experiences of First Nation adoptees, there is a need to reach to the core of their experience, assist in a healing journey, and respect this process in a cultural manner. For these ethical reasons, I need to be assured of my own spiritual grounding. I need permission from many levels, not just from signed consent forms. In many cultures, spirituality is recognized as a component of a person's wholeness; this recognition is a worldview upheld by many Aboriginal people. Research into people's lives is intrusive. To ignore the spiritual dynamics of the research process is a breach of trust. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge my place and my connection to the process through spirit and respect for those who know.

I have placed myself in this study as an Aboriginal woman who was adopted by a non-Aboriginal family and as a social worker in the field of child welfare for many years. I also am a mother and a grandmother. My own adopted life was not always easy, and I

believe it was mostly the result of the mystery of living in other people's family, borrowing other people's name and culture while being alienated from my birth family and community. But, this all changed for me one day when one of my sisters from my birth family showed up at my parents' door, asking:

> "Are you Jeannine?" When I replied that I was, she announced that she was my sister, Suzanne. My whole world changed with that announcement. I lost everything and I gained everything. It was as if something inside me shifted and I felt connected. I belonged again. No, let me rephrase that: I felt like I belonged for the first time in my life. (Carriere, 1999, p.128)

Focus

The focus of this study is First Nation adoption as it is perceived and addressed by First Nation adoptees. The term First Nation refers to the group of Aboriginal people described under the Canadian Constitution as *Indian* (First Nations).

In this study, *connectedness* is defined as a feeling of belonging, of being an important and integral part of the world. In this study, the impact of *disconnection* is the focus of the work; however, the findings confirm the importance of connectedness. Connectedness emerged as a theme throughout the study. Health is viewed from a holistic perspective, which includes spiritual, mental, emotional and physical health. In a holistic worldview, the mind, body, spirit and emotions are one. In this study, adoptees were asked to describe the relationship between connectedness, adoption and health. As well, key informants or talking circle members were asked to share their observations of adoption in First Nation communities from a socio-political and cultural perspective. Participants were from across Canada and circle members were Elders, First Nation adoption staff and adoptive parents from the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA). From the findings I make recommendations around policy and practice for the

adoption of First Nation children in Alberta and throughout Canada and describe implications for research, practice and theory.

Rationale for the Study

A study on health indicators in Aboriginal communities states that:

> For Aboriginal people, treating a problem in isolation is like trying to treat sickness by treating the symptoms of the disease and not the underlying causes. The approach to any study then requires a vision of balance and interconnectedness of individuals, families and communities in the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual life. It does not deny the problem or the need for resolution; it just recognizes that the problem cannot be treated separately from other factors that are part of the whole pattern of imbalances (University of Ottawa, Institute of the Environment, 2001, p.28).

The situation of First Nation children in care has received attention in public forums that haven't always provided a structural examination of this issue. Further in the study, statistics disclose the continuing over-representation of Aboriginal children in the care of public agencies. In past years, First Nation child welfare services in Alberta have received media attention regarding the deaths of several First Nation children deemed to be wards of the government and government-funded First Nation agencies (Simons, 2002). Reporters tended to focus on the socio-political issues within First Nation communities and their debates with the Minister of Alberta Children's Services, the provincial ministry responsible for child welfare and may lack objectivity.

The rationale for this focus includes the existence of the *Policy Directive in the Adoption of First Nation Children* (Alberta Children's Services, 1997) in the province of Alberta, where I currently reside. The policy resulted from some political pressure on the Alberta government from First Nation Chiefs from across Alberta advocating for change in adoption practices for First Nation children. This stemmed from concerns expressed by

their constituents, including First Nation Directors of Child and Family Services Agencies who witnessed a high number of children being adopted in non-Aboriginal families. Bagley et.al. (1993) stated that in Canada, in 1981 for example, 83% of First Nation children adopted were placed in Caucasian homes (p.222). Kinjerski and Herbert (2000) report that from 1992/93 to 1999/00, permanent guardianship orders (PGOs) granted on behalf of Aboriginal children increased by 74% (p.38). This was during an era in Alberta's child protection system when PGOs were often the precursor to adoption. According to existing adoption policy and practice, adoption workers from both public and private agencies, who were planning for the adoption of a First Nation child, were suppose to be consulting with the Chief and Council of the child's First Nation community The Chiefs were concerned that this policy was being ignored. Their concern was also linked to the value of the tribal family which, from a First Nation perspective, is critical to the development of a First Nation child.

The historical context for the development of the *Policy Directive* will be discussed further in the literature review in Chapter Two which includes an analysis of First Nation child welfare in Alberta. The history of First Nation Child Welfare in Alberta is contextualized in the broader history of First Nation people and colonization, including what has become known as the 'sixties scoop', where thousands of First Nation children were adopted into non-Aboriginal homes and not heard from again until later in life, if at all, by their First Nation family and community. This will form part of a historical analysis in the literature review and provides a rationale for avoiding mistakes of the past in current adoption policy for First Nation children.

Also, in the last few decades, Alberta Children's Advocate reports and other government documents have addressed the conditions of First Nation children in care (Lafrance, 1997; Rechner, 2001; Walters, 1992). Walters (1992) dedicated a chapter to Aboriginal children in his report, *In Need of Protection.* In this report, he situated Aboriginal child welfare in a historical context of colonization and stated that "it is beyond question that historic and political conditions have contributed to the child welfare issues being experienced by today's Aboriginal families and communities" (p.229) and what also stems from "the desire to 'save' Aboriginal children from what was perceived to be an 'uncivilized' tribal way of life" (p.230). Walters described how in traditional cultures, the rights of an individual must be balanced against, "and at times give way to the survival and continuity of the group or collective" (p.233). In his recommendations, Walters suggested that "adoptions involving Native children may be highly vulnerable for disruption," and that "open adoption enabling Aboriginal children to maintain contact with extended family and community after adoption should be established/presumed" (p.248). Almost a decade later, Rechner (2001) also criticized the Alberta government for the "revictimization" and maltreatment of children in public care. Rechner recommended that public agencies, including First Nation agencies, need to ensure "that the policies, procedures and practices are sensitive to the needs of the youth that they serve" (p.21). Adoption is monitored through provincial policies, procedures and practices. According to Bagley, Young and Scully (1993), these policies are general in nature and do not always take into consideration the impact on diverse populations, such as in transracial and Aboriginal adoption. Where is the root of what appears to be failure in the care of First Nation children? How does it affect those individuals who

become entrenched in it? The rationale for this study is based on answering these questions in order to advance adoption policy and practice for First Nation children, from the perspective of individuals who have been affected directly.

There is a personal rationale for me in conducting this study as I have been affected by adoption. My story is woven through this study as a way of knowing, an epistemological sensitivity and personal testimony to the importance of knowing who you are and where you come from in the experience of adoption. In my own life there is trauma that I can associate with feelings of disconnection from the rest of the world, based in hidden knowledge and silent grief. As discussed further in Chapter Three, I have been able to use this experience as a driving force to complete this study and to give me the empathy of an ally and knowledgeable witness to the stories that were told to me by the participants and key informants in the study. I believe this is the personal passion that led me to this PhD journey. I was able to use techniques from my social work practice and qualitative research techniques to ensure this personal connection did not interfere with the transfer of knowledge I received from all those who participated.

Echoing the call from the Institute of the Environment for studies that "require a vision of balance and interconnectedness of individuals, families and communities in the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual life" (2001, p.28), this study examines how the loss of community and family connectedness in adoption affects the health of First Nation adoptees. The main research question guiding this study is: How does connectedness impact the health of First Nation adoptees? In this study, First Nation adoption will be addressed from the voice of First Nation people.

In this study, the methods utilized for data collection were interviews and talking circles with specific cultural considerations given to both of these approaches. The constant comparison method in grounded theory was used to ensure a concurrent process of checking and re-checking transcripts while the data were being collected. This process, according to Glaser (1978) and Strauss and Corbin (1997), provides a systematic means to enrich the data by using procedures that continuously review the findings.

The findings from this study further our knowledge of adoption and First Nation children in several areas, as well as the general literature on adoption in areas such as transracial adoption, identity, and related topics in adoption such as abandonment and attachment. The findings also inform best practices in adoption and First Nation children, the literature on First Nation social and health issues such as the effects of cultural disconnection and early trauma. Finally the findings enhance the discipline of Human Ecology as well as other disciplines, and contributes to knowledge building and theory.

Human Ecology

The Western theoretical framework that guides this study is a Human Ecological framework that places people in an ecology of relationships such as family members, events and connections which influence their lives and responses to life events. The major tenet of Human Ecology that inspired this study is that Human Ecology deals with human beings in relationship to one another and to their surroundings. For example, Maslow's (1939) concept of self-actualization and Roger's (1961) concept of fully-functioning people are incorporated into the human ecological model of efficient and effective interaction between individuals and their environments (Westney, Brabble and Edwards, 1988). The development of human beings is dependent on the human condition

and the composite of environmental circumstances, both internal and external. The internal environment, according to Gilligan (1995), includes the physiological processes of the body and the psychological aspects of an individual. Evans (2004) concurs with Giligan in his study of child poverty. He concludes that environmental factors such as pollution and dangerous neighborhoods have a strong influence on psychological and physiological child development (in *American Psychologist,* 59. p,77).Westney et al.'s (1988) definition of the external environment encompasses the microenvironment and the macro-environment:

> The microenvironment includes the family, home, apparel, and interpersonal interactions between the individual and specific others. The macro-environment embraces the neighborhood, the community, the culture, the educational system, the church, the health care system, the economic system, government and the political system, social policies, as well as air, water, land, pollutants, environmental health conditions, occupational hazards. (p. 133)

Bubolz and Sontag (1993) describe human ecologists as practitioners who seek to enhance people's quality of life and well-being by exploring the connection between the behavior and health of people and the quality of their environment. They are interested in assessing how humans meet their goals, whether goals need to be changed, and what resources are lost and gained in the process. People establish control over their lives and environment by searching for the needed knowledge from many sources. This is perhaps the major influence derived from Human Ecology for this study in that it is a theory that supports the view that people do not exist in isolation from their environment, and the impacts of a variety of systems within an environment are significant. This study focuses on particular elements of the First Nation adoptee's environment and the meanings that are derived from experiences within this context. As previously mentioned, the environment we live in includes our families. Hollingsworth states that:

> It has become common in the study of families to recognize and value the diversity of families and family forms. In their comprehensive review of family theories and methods, Doherty, Boss, LaRossa, Schumm, and Steinmetz (1994) discussed the effect of ethnic minority group perspectives. They pointed out that scholars of various ethnic groups and others "[call] for a revised paradigm of family science that recognizes, studies, and even celebrates the diversity of family experience, especially those of marginalized and oppressed groups" (p.15). In embracing a post-positivist philosophy of science, these authors "also insist on the inevitable intermingling of scholars' personal and cultural values in their work" (p.15). (1999, p.443)

Since some Human Ecology theorists focus on family studies, Hollingsworth provides the perspective that family studies can be enhanced by examining family issues in diverse populations. Fiske and Johnny (1996) support this further by specifying how this relates to First Nation families. They state that "Although broad similarities of changing family relations and structures exist for all First Nations families, clear differences prevail as a result of specific First Nations cultural and legal traditions, particular adaptations to Euro-Canadian influences, and distinct effects of provincial policies" (p.226). These writers suggest that historical events have had an impact on Aboriginal families and family relationships; however family policies which attempted to address these events also have an impact on Aboriginal families. In this study, the historical event can be described as colonial child welfare and adoption practices and policies for First Nation children during and after the "sixties scoop". Adoption policies have had an impact on the traditional First Nation family structure and relationships therein.

Johnson (2000) suggests that there are variations in family relationships such as the emphasis on the inclusion or exclusion of potential kin. She states that "we may need new concepts in the study of kinship organization as one means of interpreting cultural diversity" (p.140, in Demo, D.H., Allen, K.R., & Fine, M.A.). These family theorists

have influenced this study by emphasizing the role of family within a person's environment and the significance of family and kin on processes such as bonding and identity formation. In this study, the issues of First Nation children and families involved in adoption are explored and can assist to advance family science with its connection to Human Ecology.

Indigenous Science

The inclusion of indigenous ways of knowing in this study has been a critical component of the research process. It is important to note here that indigenous ways of knowing that contribute to Indigenous Science haven't been reflected extensively in the literature as yet. The most prominent and recent works of various indigenous scholars have been cited in this study. Indigenous Science is based in an oral history and storytelling tradition as a means of sharing knowledge (Bastien, 2004; Couture, 2004; Gilchrist, 1997; Hart, 2002; Youngblood Henderson, 2000; Smith, 1999). It is also about intuition and observation and remaining connected to the Universe around us as human beings (Dossey, 1985; Cajete, 2000; Peat, 1994).

Peat (1994) shares this insight about Indigenous Science:

> Our western minds desire to sort things out, to arrange knowledge in a logical fashion and order the world into categories. Observation shows us that birds return to Lake Ontario and to the south shore of the St. Lawrence River at about the same time as the first thunder is heard. Just as the birds fly south before the first snow falls, so too, they reappear with the first sounds of thunder. Our linear, logical minds ask: Are these Thunder Birds actual birds, a particular ornithological species? Are they mythic being or forces of nature? Do the Mohawk people believe the thunder brings the Thunder Birds or that the birds bring the thunder? Searching for answers to questions like these, one begins to wonder if they are the right questions to ask in the first place, indeed, if such questions make any sense at all (p.5).

Peat skillfully engages the reader in a thought process that leads him/her to question his or her own reality and to wonder if other realities are similarly valid. This awareness is the recognition that in the Western world there exists other ways of knowing, such as indigenous or Aboriginal ways of knowing, that stem from a science or body of knowledge that has existed as long as indigenous people have been in the world. These Aboriginal ways of knowing, referred to as *epistemology* in Western terms, are explained by Bastien (2004):

> It is imperative for colonized people to step outside the implicit body of assumptions carried by the English language and to resist a dissociative and objectifying epistemology. If Indigenous epistemologies are to survive, the use of native languages and the appropriate storied philosophies is mandatory. Indigenous epistemologies have to assert their distinctiveness to ensure that they are not appropriated or undermined by universalistic assumptions and other features of Eurocentred epistemologies, languages and value (p.99).

Earlier testimonies of this phenomenon include Smith, (1999) who proposed that the experiences of Indigenous peoples are not accounted in texts, which creates problems of recognition and validity. She observes that the western academic approach "privileges sets of texts, views about the history of an idea, what issues count as significant, and by engaging in the same process uncritically, we too can render indigenous writers invisible or unimportant while reinforcing the validity of other writers" (p.36).

The use of indigenous science in this study provides the framework for the discussion of First Nation adoption from the distinct knowledge base of those affected by this experience without leaning solely on the assumptions found in western knowledge systems. Indigenous science informs us that knowledge is situated in the present and past such as in ancestral knowledge that we carry within our spiritual selves, and which Cajete (2000) refers to as "intuitions of the sacred" (p.283). By encouraging reflection and

storytelling, the adoptees in this study were invited to enter a space where there was opportunity to connect with their inner selves, which Cajete describes as "the breath of human spirit that animates knowledge toward meaning and ecological consciousness" (p.284). Youngblood Henderson (2000) states that Aboriginal knowledge "reflects the state of being within a certain ecology" (p.264).

This state of being also has been explored by some western physicians who sought to understand this knowledge in western terms. Dossey (1985), a medical doctor, describes the existence of a *nonlocal mind* connected to our bodies and from which feelings, memories, intuitions are connected (p.87). Hammerschlag (1988), also a physician, worked extensively with American Indians and came to understand other ways of knowing similar to Dossey. In *The Dancing Healers: A Doctor's Journey of Healing with Indigenous Voice and Vision*, Dr. Hammerschlag describes how he came to appreciate the importance of spirit in the process of recovery. Once he acknowledged the power of prayer, ceremony, and connectedness, he found that he had become a better healer. He discovered that "the past and future are everlasting *now*. In this ongoing present reality, we are connected to those who came before and those who will come after" (1988, p. 136). Both Dossey and Hammerschlag like others before them struggled with notions of ancestors in our current lives. It is only in recent years that findings in Western science, such as the discovery of memory in our deoxyribonucleic acid, have begun to validate these teachings. Yet, indigenous people have had this knowledge for centuries. This teaching is an integral part of the indigenous worldview; it is a belief that when we pray and sit in ceremony, we invite the ancestors to join us. We know them, and they know us.

The value of circular processes and philosophy provides an important context for discussion. The circle represents *relationships*. This is the foundation of Indigenous Science. Hart (1996) discusses the medicine wheel as a symbol of these relationships with people and their development. He states:

> The medicine wheel usually explains concepts in sets of four, with one factor represented in each direction of the wheel. East, South, West and North. In regards to good health and healing there are considered to be four primary components in a whole individual; the spiritual, the emotional, the physical, and the mental. Recognizing these four aspects, every individual needs to balance them by paying attention to each component. When each aspect is developed equally, an individual is considered well-balanced and in harmony. (p.66)

Both the Human Ecological Framework and the Indigenous Scientific Framework acknowledge the importance of our environments in making sense of the world we live in, creating who we are, influencing our health and exploring meanings and possibilities for our future. These are the principles from each framework that are complimentary in nature and set the stage for the following chapters which will examine the relevant literature on adoption and Aboriginal health that pertain to this study, with health being discussed from a holistic perspective. For example, Chapter Three, the methodology chapter, is described from both western scientific and indigenous scientific methods. Findings are presented within a medicine wheel or ecological conceptual framework. Recommendations are formulated from a structural analysis of recommendations from the adoptees and key informants in the study. The purpose of this approach is to inform adoption policy and practice in a manner that acknowledges the environmental impact of adoption for First Nation peoples.

The Strength of Using Two Frameworks: Human Ecology and Indigenous Science

One of the strengths of this study is that both the Human Ecological and Indigenous Scientific frameworks come together in the examination of First Nation adoption. The overlap with both theories is exemplified in the focus on relationships of people with their internal and external environments, and how this impacts health. The major differences exist in worldviews and interpretation of this environmental context. One of the complexities in understanding First Nation adoption issues from a non First Nation perspective is the difference in values and interpretation of concepts such as family, community and the role of spirituality or ways of knowing. Another difference with Human Ecological theory and Indigenous Science theory is that Indigenous theory stems from a spiritual base and connection while Human Ecology stems from a western scientific body of knowledge.

The following table demonstrates this further by providing an overview of how concepts differ and merge as related to this study. It features components of each and how they are defined in the literature. I propose that the common ground is the fact that both frameworks support the importance of an ecological context for human development.

Table 1: Two Frameworks with Common Ground

Western framework: Human Ecology	Indigenous Scientific Framework
Family	Kinship or clan
Individual and environment	Community and environment
Individual identity	Collective identities
Grounded in western science	Grounded in spirituality
Interdependence	Interconnection
Control over the environment	Being part of the environment
Grounded in colonization	Grounded in decolonization
Common Ground Connectedness to environment or ecology is integral to human development	

Both frameworks place the First Nation adoptee in an environment where the themes of attachment, abandonment, cultural issues, kinship, identity and connectedness become factors in the human ecological and ontological context of being a First Nation adoptee, growing up separated from birth family and community. Essentially, examining how these factors relate to, and affect the health of First Nation adoptees, is the crux of this study. In pursuing it with both frameworks as guides, the findings of the study can be utilized to advance both theories and lead the way for more research of this nature that can focus on commonalities while respecting differences in working with First Nations children and their families.

The literature review in the next chapter, Chapter Two, provides an overview of scholarly work that informs the rest of this dissertation. The literature on connectedness and First Nation health is presented first as it is critical to this study. Particular themes that are common in adoption literature have also been selected. Abandonment was chosen for its relevance to the impact on adoptee health and how this is discussed in the literature. Attachment theory is not an adoption theory per se, however it has been used by adoption researchers to explore adoption issues. Parallels in transracial adoption and Aboriginal adoption exist, in particular as they relate to identity and culture. The methodology in Chapter Three is described from both a western qualitative approach and an indigenous approach. The analysis and results or findings are captured in Chapter Four with a comparative analysis to studies in the existing literature. Recommendations are explained in Chapter Five. Chapter Six concludes the dissertation, which is followed by a personal epilogue in Chapter Seven.

The journey begins.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that in qualitative research, "literature can be used as an analytic tool if we are careful to think about it in theoretical terms", and that, "the literature can provide a rich source of events to stimulate thinking about properties and for asking conceptual questions" (p.47). In this study the literature provided an important historical context for analysis and a review of relevant policy and practice issues for First Nation adoption.

The literature review begins with an overview of First Nation adoption, the central context for the development of the study. This overview is followed by various themes in the adoption literature that have implications for this study. The history of adoption begins early and is presented as part of the context that sets the stage for the examination of theories that influence adoption policy today. Within the last few decades, several themes have emerged in the adoption literature that has relevance for this study such as: *abandonment, attachment and cross-cultural adoptions that focus on identity and culture.* Abandonment by the birth family reinforces the significance placed on attachment to the adoptive family. Some of the literature on cross-cultural adoption explores the correlation between Aboriginal children and other racial groups in areas such as identity formation. The impact of adoption on identity was discussed by most participants and key informants in this study, providing the rationale for exploring this further in the literature. The significance of connectedness in the literature on adoption and determinants of health are explored as these are central themes linked with adoption in this study. The relationship of connectedness to health is explored in the literature on Aboriginal health, which for this study, is viewed in holistic terms. It is important to note

that the literature was examined from both western and indigenous perspectives by citing scholars from both paradigms. As with most explorations, history sets the stage for further discussion.

Historical Background

Numerous researchers and writers (Baran, Pannor and Sorosky, 1976; Kirk and McDaniel, 1984; Rosenberg as cited in Krichbaum, 1993) suggest that adoption, as a practice, existed since the beginning of humankind. Adoption regulations can be found in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (Lifton, 1988).

From the beginning, adoption has fulfilled multiple objectives, such as nurturing and providing supervision for children whose parents have died (Bolles, 1984). Even mythology provides accounts of adoption in which babies are "found" and taken care of by an alternate caregiver for a lifetime. For example, Moses is a biblical reference to the first well-known adoptee. However, the central theme in these ancient parables and myths is that these children typically are from poor backgrounds, "abandoned" by their mothers, and taken in by adoptive parents who are viewed as compassionate, charitable people.

Moving away from these early adoptions, the turning point in adoption history occurs in feudal England where poor houses were set up for orphans. The charitable model of parental and private care found in earlier adoption citations is now replaced with a model which is public in nature and with the objective of extracting payment from these children to society for looking after their needs. Church parishes were responsible for food, clothing and shelter until the child was old enough to be indentured or put to work. This approach was essentially an apprenticeship program where a child was trained to work as an alternative for families without children (Klibanoff and Klibanoff, 1973).

The child care model of the colonial system was based on a value that taking care of dependent children needs to be done as cheaply as possible. In other words, children are not valued for being human beings but are considered as property to be maintained in exchange for service. Several programs, such as putting out, farm almshouses, orphanages, rural free foster homes, and supervised boarding homes were the beginnings of legalized adoption in America (Krichbaum, 1993). The early statutes regarding adoption resembled a property deed or bill of sale (Lifton, 1988). It was not until the 1920s that the notion of the best interests of the child became part of the public position of child welfare agencies in the United States and Canada (Howell as cited in Lifton, 1988).

However, this principle of best interests often was ignored in circumstances where the state could benefit, as documented in Canada's Duplessis Orphans case. This matter, which has been brought to public attention for compensation, has been described as "one of the clearest cases of systemic discrimination imaginable" (Duplessis Orphans Committee, 2001, p.1). The *Duplessis Orphans* case is the story of thousands of children in the province of Quebec deemed to be illegitimate and who were contained in asylums and institutions against their will. The church, as a partner in this process, received money for acting as a broker in this arrangement during the 1940s and 1950s. Essentially, the church became involved in administrating private adoptions for which they received payment from the government (Poirier, 1999). This case can be interpreted as violating many laws, including Canada's Civil Code for the abuse imposed upon those children. The legal implications of this type of adoptive relationship remain today and are characterized by the notion that for adoptees, genetic connections are irrelevant and

dispensable, when names, family history and health information are removed from adoption records.

The literature review now moves into a historical analysis of First Nation adoption for it is this portion of adoption history that provides a further rationale for this study.

An Overview of Adoption and First Nation People

Even though some Aboriginal scholars have examined the impact of adoption and First Nation children, Locust (2000) finds that "there is a lack of sufficient research dedicated specifically to the investigation of this issue" (p.11). Much of the literature leads a reader through an often painful journey that poignantly reveals that adoption is not a positive experience for many First Nation people (Anderson, 2000; Fournier & Crey, 1997; Samson Flood, 1997; Spears, 2003). This difficult journey is echoed in Crey's (1997) reference to social workers as "wolves in sheep's clothing." As well, *Flowers on My Grave* (1997) is the story of Lester Desjarlais, a Dakota Objibwe boy from Manitoba, who committed suicide after experiencing extreme abuse. In this book, one of the Elders from his community, Maggie Blacksmith, tells of the days when private adoption agencies would receive funds between $5,000 to $10,000 for each child:

> Big shiny cars would come onto the reserve, followed by the social worker's car. When they left, there'd be a little Indian child sitting in the back of the American car, bawling their eyes out. The social worker always had a piece of paper saying it was legal. We know the social worker was paid but we'd have known right away if any parents got money, because we lived so close together and we were all so poor, money would have been very conspicuous. If parents tried to keep their kids, the social worker would call the Mounties. (Teichrob, 1997, p.41)

Samson Flood (1995) describes the impact of adoption on Lost Bird, a Sioux child who was adopted by a general in the American army after retrieving her from underneath the

body of her dead mother at Wounded Knee. Eventually, Lost Bird, herself, died a tragic death after years of appearing "tormented" with mental health problems. Samson Flood writes "the cost of being taken from the Lakota was more than the loss of her language, her music, her food, her kinship; it was the loss of her identity as a human being" (p.210). Anderson (2000) writes about being confused as a result of growing up away from her First Nation relatives and compares the experience to what she refers to as the *adoption syndrome* experienced by First Nation children who are emotionally, physically and spiritually driven to find themselves. Spears (2003) describes her troubled experiences in meeting her birth family and community while searching for her identity.

Researchers have suggested that alienation from this knowledge may be a causal factor for damaged health in First Nation adoptees. Locust (2000) observes that American Indian adoptees experience an adoption syndrome that she describes as the *Split Feather Syndrome*. In her study with 20 American Indian adoptees, she found that "the cluster of long-term psychological liabilities exhibited by American Indian adults who experienced non-Indian placements as children may be recognized as a syndrome, or set of symptoms" (p.11).

Adoption breakdown or *dissolution* is described as the rejection by adoptees of adoptive parents and adoptive identity (Child Welfare League of America, 2000). Since there is no formal mechanism in Canada to follow up with any adoptee once the adoption order is granted in court, there is no official record of the number of adoption dissolutions with First Nation adoptees in Canada. For example, if a birth mother relinquishes her child to a private adoption agency or does not disclose the identity of the father, this child

will not be recognized on Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's (INAC) *A-List*, which is an official record of First Nation adoptees in Canada (Bennett, 2002, p.23).

First Nation child and family services agency staff across the country can provide examples of testimonials from adoptees who have shared their stories with them. In Manitoba, adoption dissolution had been occurring at an uncomfortably high rate, leading to the development of the Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program in 1994. This agency continues to exist today to serve as an advocate for First Nation adoptees who are searching for their birth family and community. Over the years, thousands of adoptees have come through their doors; however, to date INAC has refused to fund this service (Fournier and Crey, 1998, p.91). In fact, there are a limited number of government-funded programs in Canada that help Aboriginal adoptees find their birth families and communities.

Lazarus's (1997) research draws comparisons between American and Canadian adoption systems, particularly as the systems pertain to the adoption of tribal children. Lazarus (1997) reports that adoption reformers argue that Canadian adoption laws should be amended to consider a child's culture in adoption cases. One of the biggest challenges with adoption and child welfare for First Nations in Canada is that the judicial standards are based on the best interest of the child, which often conflicts with the First Nation view that a child is a tribal member of an extended family. Lazarus explains "In Canada, as in the U.S., the problem is partly attributable to the application of culturally biased values in evaluating the ability of First Nation families to take care of their children, exacerbated by the ambiguity of the law at this time" (1997, p.266). Some examples of these cultural biases include standards for adoptive homes (e.g., space), financial status,

and past child welfare or legal involvement. For instance, housing shortages on reserve sometimes necessitate that three generations live in one home (Royal Commission Report 1996). However, this practice may not be viewed positively by mainstream standards.In Alberta, the Adoption Regulations ensure that home assessment requirements include the exploration of space, financial capacity and others in the home. Adoptive homes are defined as having 'parents' without emphasis on extended families or kinship structures. In a section entitled 'Family Dynamics" there is no mention of grandparents or extended family. The autonomy of family members is explored (Alberta Regulation 187/2004. Adoption Regulations). These regulations imply a western view of family and child caring practices.

Lazarus views the *National Indian Child Welfare Act* in the United States as a tool that assists tribes to prevent the adoption of Native American children by non-Indian parents, giving increased jurisdiction in matters of child welfare services to Indian families (1997, p.270). The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) in the United States, which has been prominent in advancing research and practice for Aboriginal child welfare services in Canada, was instrumental in lobbying for the proclamation of the *National Indian Child Welfare Act* in the United States. NICWA has held a number of annual conferences addressing a range of topics related to practice with Aboriginal children and families and continues to advocate for the rights of Native American children and adoption. For example, the *Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (P.L. 103-82)* was passed in 1994 "in response to a belief that policies which gave consideration to race, color or national origin in making foster care and adoptive placement decisions often created a barrier to achieving permanency for children of color" (NICWA, 1999,

p.1). However, there is an exemption to the legislation that pertains to Native American children eligible for placements under the *National Indian Child Welfare Act*. This exemption has largely resulted from the fact that the United States Congress recognizes the "unique political relationship" that Indian children have with tribal governments (NICWA, 2002, p.1).

Unfortunately, this guarantee of a child's rights within a tribal community context is not afforded to First Nation children in Canada. To date, Canadian provinces continue to administer adoption programs with little or no consideration to the inherent rights of First Nation children. Canadian policy places the issue of adoption and First Nation children within a context of cross-cultural adoption, failing to recognize the contradictions in this practice. The issue is not about race, colour or national origin; it is about the preservation of First Nation self-determination within a continuing colonial context. The next section provides an overview of the historical context or circumstances which led to the situation we find ourselves in today with First Nation adoption.

The Context for Adoption and Child Welfare Services in First Nation Communities

As detailed in Canada's *Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996), across Canada, the child welfare system has been marked by an over-representation of Aboriginal children in care (Government of Canada, 1996; Alberta Children's Services, 2000; Mirwaldt, 2004). This fact is situated in a colonial context in which First Nation people in Canada have experienced a number of losses (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2003; Scarth, 2004; Schouls, 2002; Youngblood Henderson; 2000). Schouls (2002) explains that "the ability for Canadians to *justify* the innumerable documented acts of injustice

against Aboriginal peoples on the grounds that European culture was more 'modern' and thus 'superior' stands as a legacy of the distortion still reflected in today's relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples" (p.15). Youngblood Henderson (2000) describes colonialism as an ideology that created a "massive hemorrhage" and a "traumatic legacy" in Aboriginal communities in Canada (p. 71). He further asserts that one of the many consequences of colonialism is that the norms of colonized societies were altered, including relationships between adult and child. For example, Bellefeuille and Ricks (2003) discuss a *protection paradigm* in child welfare services as a systematic approach utilized in a "practice orientation based on individual deficit" (2003, p.24) as opposed to a holistic worldview of child development. Bellefeuille and Ricks suggest that this approach has been a causal factor in "a model that has caused so much damage to Aboriginal families and communities" (2003, p.24). How does adoption fit into this paradigm? Scarth (2004), as president of the Adoption Council of Canada, proposes that all stakeholders need to work collaboratively on this issue (in *Straight Talk,* November 2004, http://www.adoption.ca).

Adoption is not solely a Western concept (Alberta Children's Services, 2000; Durst, 1999; Kimmelman, 1984). First Nation people had words, ceremonies and processes for adoption long before contact. Historically, child rearing was a shared responsibility, and children often resided with adults who were not their biological parents (Durst, 1999). This shared child rearing may have arisen from a death or loss of a child's parent(s), a claim by a relative for that child, or an apparent benefit to the child (Kimmelman, 1984). Shared child rearing also provided a means for caring for the elderly as they had a critical role through their teachings and responsibilities in the child's

development. Children retained knowledge of and access to their birth parents and kin, even when they became part of the adoptive parents' kin group (Alberta Ministry of Children's Services, 2000)

Justice Kimmelman (1984) in a historical report on First Nation and Métis adoptions in the province of Manitoba writes:

> The raising of children is seen as a communal responsibility with the immediate and extended family carrying the primary responsibility for a specific child. In addition to the input of grandparents, aunts, uncles and other siblings, the parents, it is understood, may select a specific person to assume a special role in the child's life. This person will oversee the child's development, teach necessary skills, and maintain a lifelong relationship with the child. Adoption in native communities does not only apply to children. A family may adopt a grandparent. A child may adopt an uncle or aunt. A man may adopt another brother and each will assume all the rights and responsibilities of a natural brother to each other's wife, children and relatives (p.163).

Justice Kimmelman was called to review the situation of adoption in Manitoba as a result of the moratorium on Aboriginal adoptions in the early 1980s. At that time, the Chiefs of Manitoba and other Aboriginal leaders expressed concern that the Manitoba Children's Aid Society was treating Aboriginal children as an export product (Kimmelman, 1984). Thousands of children had been sent to the United States or overseas, never to be seen again by their relatives and their communities. The adoptions that were processed for the United States were administered by aggressive American adoption agencies. Fournier and Crey (1998) report that in 1981, "55% of the native children in care in Manitoba were sent out of province for adoption compared to only 7% of Caucasian children" (p.88). In his final report, *No Quiet Place, A Report on Indian and Métis Adoptions,* Justice Kimmelman concludes that "cultural genocide has been taking place in a systematic routine manner" and "one gets an image of children stacked in foster homes as used cars

are stacked on corner lots just waiting for the right buyer to stroll by" (as cited in Fournier and Crey, 1998, p. 88).[1]

Johnston (1983) reported that during the period from 1976 to 1981, approximately 40% of the children in care of the Ministry of Social Services in British Columbia were Aboriginal. Johnston referred to the removal of Aboriginal children from their family and community as the *sixties scoop*. The term *scoop* refers to the expediency with which the removal was undertaken. Johnston explains that the sixties scoop was done under the premise of the best interests of child. However, "the effect of apprehension on Indian families and communities was that some reserves lost almost a whole generation of their children as a result" (Johnston, 1983, p.23).

In 1980, the new child welfare legislation in British Columbia included reference to the notification of adoption to First Nations, but there were no provisions to include First Nations in decisions regarding child welfare (MacDonald, 1981). The notification process was deemed an appropriate courtesy, which seemed to imply that these children were merely commodities with a transfer of title. In 1980, the Spalumcheen First Nation near Vernon, British Columbia organized a historic demonstration against their band member children being placed in non-Aboriginal foster homes, off reserve. The Band adopted a by-law, *For the Care of Our Indian Children*, as a form of social action by which they could achieve total control of child welfare services in their jurisdiction. Under this by-law, the Chief and Council had the authority to apprehend children. This approach was considered to "reflect the traditional consensus means by which family problems are resolved within Indian cultures" (MacDonald, 1981, p.22). However, the

[1] It is important to note that some of the adoptees referred to in Justice Kimmelman's report participated in this study.

by-law has been criticized for being unconstitutional and perhaps invalid under the *Canadian Bill of Rights* and the *Indian Act*, which convenes social services as a provincial responsibility. It is also important to examine the findings of two prominent studies which specifically examined the issue of Aboriginal adoption in order to reflect how the current study adds to the existing body of knowledge addressing First Nation adoption.

Two Prominent Studies

The most famous study to date is Fanshel (1972) who interviewed 392 sets of parents who had adopted Aboriginal children aged 0 to 11 years. Fanshel concluded that Aboriginal children in these homes experienced some problems in adolescence, particularly around racism, with a future described as 'guardedly optimistic' because of their placement in white homes. Fanshel concluded that this was due to the fact that at least they had been taken out of deplorable conditions and had been 'saved' through adoption (1972, p.339).

Bagley, Scully and Young (1993) surveyed 1900 adults through a large random sample that produced the result of 93 families who had adopted a child. They proceeded to develop a case study in Alberta with 37 Aboriginal adoptees and 20 inter-country adoptees for a follow-up study. Their study drew comparable conclusions to those found in this study on connectedness, adoption and health for First Nation adoptees by stating:

> Results indicate that Native child adoptions are significantly likely than any other parenting situation to involve problems and difficulties, and a fifth of the Native adoptees had by the age of 15, separated from their adoptive parents. A follow-up of the adoptees two years later indicated that nearly half of the Native adoptees and none of the inter-country adopted group had separated from parents because of behavioral or emotional problems, or parent-child conflict (Bagley, Scully and Young, 1993, p.225).

Bagley et al.(1993) further state that some of the behavioral and emotional problems experienced by these Aboriginal adoptees are "significantly poorer self-esteem and [they] were also more than three times as likely than any other group to have problems of serious suicidal ideas or acts of deliberate self-harm" (p.225) and poor adjustment, possibly due to problems of ethnicity (p.226). The authors conclude that although the Caucasian families had tried to provide some assistance to their Aboriginal children with identity formation, they had not succeeded and that "there is little possibility for a Native child to adapt successfully in a white family" (p.237).

These conclusions are controversial in the community of non-Aboriginal adoptive parents and workers who feel compelled to place Aboriginal children in permanent caregiving arrangements such as adoption.

A Critical Review of First Nation Child Welfare Policy in Alberta

In the province of Alberta, as in other jurisdictions, the removal of First Nation children from their families and communities can be situated in a policy environment that has been influenced by a series of historical events. First Nation child welfare began in earnest with the residential school system (Calliou, 1999; Haig-Brown, 1993; Métis Nation of Alberta, 2004; Meyerhoff, 1994; Sinclair, Philips & Bala, 1991). This form of education "clearly demonstrated the belief of governments and the dominant society that assimilation through education of young Aboriginal children was necessary and was to be achieved by removing the children from the influence of their parents and community" (Sinclair, Philips and Bala, 1991, p.173). Today, the residential school system is viewed as a deliberate attempt to implement cultural genocide in First Nation communities by many Aboriginal and non Aboriginal scholars. Haig-Brown (1993) describes various

forms of discipline, which she distinctly refers to as *torture* used on the children, including the punishment of First Nation children for speaking their languages. She explains that the elimination of language has always been a primary stage in the process of cultural genocide (1993, p.15).

In Alberta, the last residential schools were closed in the 1970s (Government of Canada, 1996). The relationship between child welfare involvement in Aboriginal communities and residential schools has been well documented. Calliou (1999) discusses this relationship, maintaining that it must be considered more broadly than in terms of health consequences and that "there is no doubt that residential schools have had long-term, traumatic, holistic and intergenerational effects" (p.178). Similarly, Meyerhoff (1994), "coming on the heels of residential schools where cultural and familial connections had been supremely strained, the sixties scoop was a genocidal coup de gras (final blow) for Canada's First Nations" (p.11). Recently, the Métis Nation of Alberta published a book on the impact of residential schools for Métis people. They also concur that this event was the introduction to unhealthy and damaging family dynamics in Aboriginal communities (p.133).

Long before the final closing of residential schools in Alberta, a woman's advocacy group, the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (1947), accused the Alberta government of being a negligent parent in the administration of child protection services. In their report, the group suggested to the provincial government that in removing children from neglectful parents, they were obligated to provide them with the care expected of a good parent (Alberta Family and Social Services, 1981). Justice Catonio (as cited in Alberta Family and Social Services, 1981) wrote a report that

included a recommendation for the increase in Aboriginal foster homes. In 1975, the Department of Social Services and Community Health, responsible for child welfare services, provided the Voice of Alberta Native Women Society with $90,000 to recruit Aboriginal foster homes in Alberta.

Approximately 150 homes were recruited the first year. However, only a handful of homes met the middle-class requirements, such as a bedroom for every child, and were approved by the Department. This situation seemed to justify the continuation of non-Aboriginal foster and adoptive homes (Alberta Family and Social Services, 1981). This result is typical in Aboriginal child welfare agencies and programs; funding is often provided with criteria that usually are unrealistic and culturally biased. For example, to date, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada provides funding for children 'in care" of First Nation agencies and expect First Nation agencies to address prevention from their operational grants (INAC, 2005). This implies that First Nation children require apprehension from their family and community prior to receiving services. Currently a funding review is being undertaken to propose a national funding strategy to change these policies (First Nation Caring Society, 2005).

In 1981, the Alberta Ombudsman Report emphasized the need for more Aboriginal foster homes and more Aboriginal social workers. In 1983, Justice Cavenaugh argued that it was important to empower Indian people to look after their own children and praised the momentous *Blackfoot Tripartite Agreement* among the tribal government of Siksika in southern Alberta, the provincial government and the federal government. The *Blackfoot Tripartite Agreement* was the first First Nations child welfare agreement in

Alberta and the second agreement in Canada. The Dakota Ojibwe in Manitoba had been the first to enter into a similar agreement.

In its 1984 statistical report, *Distribution of Native Population and Child Welfare Caseloads in Alberta,* Alberta Family and Social Services found that in most regions of the province, Aboriginal children represented 50% to 80% of the caseloads. In the same year, the child welfare legislation in Alberta was amended. For the first time since the inception of the legislation in the 1940s, Indian children were officially acknowledged under Section 73, The Indian Child, of Alberta's *Child Welfare Act*. During my work as a social worker and as an Aboriginal child welfare policy analyst, the amended legislation has been contentious for First Nation people since its inception. For example, Section 73 requires that social workers *consult* with Chief and Council prior to applying for Temporary or Permanent Guardianship or a Supervision Order in which guardianship remains with the parent. Under a Supervision Order, the Ministry of Alberta Children's Services provides a monitoring function. This provision only applies if the child is deemed *ordinarily resident* on reserve. If the child is not ordinarily resident, the director, as a delegate of the Minister of Alberta Children's Services, will ask the child's guardian for *permission* to consult with Chief and Council "not more than 20 days after the order" (Alberta Children's Service, 1984, p.52).

This consultation process has been difficult for First Nation agencies, Chief and Council, and guardians. For example, it is difficult in an extended family system to make decisions that may destroy kinship patterns for a lifetime. It also is difficult for Aboriginal people who are familiar with a consensus decision-making model to make unilateral decisions on behalf of others. Front-line social workers employed with the

Ministry of Alberta Children's Services also have concerns with the requirements, including their own fears and frustrations of consultations with the child's First Nation. The fears may be based in a lack of communication skills with First Nation and that somehow they would end up in a political battle (Carriere and Pype, 2001). As well, the findings from this study reveal that consultations occurred differently across Alberta. In some regions, for example, workers did not conduct social and family histories because the regional management team did not view this as important (p. 20). Moreover, words like *consult* and *permission* can be perceived as patronizing when the process for implementation is not supported in application by a consistent policy or procedure. When a process becomes discretionary in this manner, it may not be followed through in practice and can result in Aboriginal children being treated differently as a result of geography, resource allocation, or practice philosophy. The reference to *adoption* in Alberta's *Child Welfare Act* (1984) supports this discretionary approach:

> If after this Act comes into force, a person adopts a child who is Indian, that person shall:
> a) take reasonable measures on behalf of the child necessary for the child to exercise any rights he may have as an Indian, and;
> b) as soon as, in the opinion of that person, the child is capable of understanding his status as an Indian, inform the child of that status.

The reference to "take reasonable measures" leaves room for choice in determining how this process is undertaken. Telling a child about his/her Indian status is left to the "opinion" of the adoptive parent; there are records of children who did not know and were not told about their Indian status because, in the opinion of their guardian, it was negative to be an Indian (YTSA, 2001).

Fournier and Crey (1998) explain that "adoptive families were encouraged to treat even a status Indian child as their own, freely erasing his or her birth name and tribe of

origin, thus implicitly extinguishing the child's cultural birthright"(p.84). While Fournier and Crey appear to be critical of adoptive parents for this lack of information sharing, it is important to consider that it may have been policy or practice for some adoptive parents, but this was not the case for all parents. Also, this practice must be placed into the systemic context where parents are supported and, at times, encouraged through adoption legislation to proceed with name changes. However, this practice is only one of the issues of *secrecy* in adoption practice. The lack of adequate information in adoption files is another contentious issue for adoptees. The practice of removing or the *blackening* of information has created further confusion and conflict for adoptees who wish to know their full story. Yet, once again, this practice is encouraged as being in the best interest of the child. While Section 73 of Alberta's *Child Welfare Act* appears to have represented the best interests of Indian children, it could be manipulated to create a two-tiered service delivery system for First Nation children and their families. It is this type of exploitation which is characteristic of continued colonialism in child welfare services where the system has "served to constrain judicial decision-making so to minimize, and even negate in some instances, the relevance and importance of maintaining a child's First Nations identity and culture" (Kline, 1992, p.391).

The history of policy for First Nation children in Alberta would not be complete without recognizing the life of Richard Cardinal. Richard, a young Métis boy, was in foster care for most of his life. He committed suicide on July 27, 1984. Richard left a diary in which he described the suffering, isolation and abuse he experienced while living in several foster homes:

> I was taken into the house and they showed me where I would sleep. The room was in the basement of the house. When I walked into the room I could not

> believe my eyes. The floor was covered with water (about an inch and a half) and there were boards on the floor to keep your feet from getting wet. It looked like something you would see in a horror movie. (1984, pages not identified)

Albertans were outraged. In response, Dr. Ray Thomlinson, Dean of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary, was asked to conduct an inquiry into Richard's case. In his final report, *The Case Management Review and Report* (1987), Dr. Thomlinson makes several recommendations, including the need to appoint an advisory committee on Aboriginal child welfare issues.[2]

The advisory committee produced a number of reports and a policy document entitled *In the Interests of Native Child Welfare Services* (1986). This policy document was later revised and became Tab 8 of the *Alberta Child Welfare Policy Manual*, which calls for the priority placement of Aboriginal children in the following manner:

1. Placement with the child's extended family.
2. In the local community, settlement or Indian home reserve.
3. With caregivers of the same Aboriginal, cultural, spiritual and linguistic background.
4. With other Aboriginal caregivers.
5. Resources other than the Aboriginal child's cultural background, but with caregivers who are willing and capable of ensuring that the child will establish and maintain contact with persons of the child's Aboriginal culture and spiritual beliefs. (Alberta Children's Services, Child Welfare Handbook-08-01)

Although Aboriginal practitioners appreciated this policy as one of the few direct references to help ensure Aboriginal children remained connected to their family and community, Tab 8 as a policy became discretionary, as well. Some social workers applied the policy with some flexibility while others assumed a literal interpretation of it. One of the findings by Carriere and Pype (2001) was that in a sample of 50 Aboriginal children

[2] I served on this advisory committee for three years from 1985 to 1988.

in year 2000, 29 were placed in resources (homes) other than the child's own cultural background (p.18).

In 1997, over a decade after Richard Cardinal's death and after several years of practice with the new *Child Welfare Act* and policies, the All Chiefs Summit of Alberta advocated for the *Policy Directive in the Adoption of First Nation Children* (1997). This directive prevents the adoption of First Nation children by non-First Nation adoptive parents unless approved by signature of the Chief and Council of the child's First Nation community. From 1997 to 1999, 11 adoptions of First Nation children were finalized in Alberta under this directive (Alberta Ministry of Children's Services, 2000). Some of these adoptions came with *Access Agreements* that specified how birth families and communities would remain involved with the child. Although it is possible for birth families and communities to be involved in these types of adoptions in Alberta, it is more the exception than the rule. Adoption remains a *closed* judicial process in the Western justice system, and there are few First Nation families that want to become adoptive parents within this system. Lazarus (1997) reasons that this is due to the fact that "the adequacy of the home is based on idealized Anglo standards, rather than tribal cultural norms" (p.265).

Many First Nation children remain in foster care with no plans for permanency, and at times, moving from home to home in what is often referred to as "the foster care drift" (Kufeldt, 1994). Shortly after the *Policy Directive in the Adoption of First Nation Children* was implemented, the number of First Nation children with a Permanent Guardianship Order (PGO) increased dramatically (Kinjerski & Herbert, 2000). While this was a positive outcome of the directive, it was, unfortunately, an unintended

consequence. In 2004, there were over 4,000 First Nation children in the Alberta child welfare system, over half of them with PGO status and over the age of twelve. Regrettably, this situation greatly reduces their chances for adoption (Alberta Ministry of Children's Services, 2004).

In 1999, the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) in Alberta developed a new approach to adoption, the Open-Customary Adoption Program, which is the first of its kind in Canada. Under this program, First Nation children living in kinship placements in one of the five communities of the Yellowhead Tribal Council (YTC) could be considered for an adoption which would be open, blessed through ceremony and officiated by a judge to ensure all legal requirements are met (Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency, 2001).

In 2000, four adoptions took place as a result of the YTSA Open-Customary Adoption Program. A judge held court at the Enoch Cree Nation, west of Edmonton, and in his official capacity, he heard and granted the petitions for adoption. The adoption ceremony included a pipe ceremony involving the Elders and Chiefs of the five YTC First Nations and the judge. There was a Grand Entry, or official entry, which included Elders from the five First Nations, Chiefs, and the adoptive families and children, who entered to the sound of drumming and a traditional adoption song. The children were presented to their adoptive parents by their grandmothers or another representative from their birth family. Many of the people who were involved in the ceremony viewed it as an open, spiritual and extremely moving occasion. Unfortunately, for the Alberta Ministry of Children's Services and the federal department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), this event was deemed to be an "exceptional circumstance" since the YTSA is

the only First Nation child and family services agency that has developed an adoption program of this kind in Canada.

INAC is the federal government source for all First Nation child and family service agencies in Canada. First Nations sign an agreement with INAC that describes how services will be delivered. Because child welfare falls under provincial legislation for First Nation people, the province usually is a signatory to these agreements and assumes a monitoring role in the activities of the agency. In some cases, First Nations permit the province to deliver some of the statutory services, such as child protection. Over the last five years in Alberta, First Nations increasingly have been delivering all services on reserve. However, the funding model as dictated by INAC is focused on child protection and not the "softer" services, such as prevention and early intervention. This situation is the bitter irony; INAC will provide funding to First Nation agencies to *remove* children from their homes, but will not support services that keep families together.

Similarly, adoption is not viewed by INAC as a service that should be provided by First Nations. For the YTSA, the funding for the Open-Customary Adoption Program was granted on a pilot basis by the Alberta government. At this time, with many adoptive families waiting to be approved, the YTSA has exhausted additional funding possibilities. From a colonial perspective, this is yet another example of an imperial government use of power and control to re-enforce dependency by restricting funding, and thus, maintaining the legacy of First Nations as wards of the state. As Connors and Maidman (2001) report, government action remains focused on crisis management rather than prevention of family disruption (p. 411).

One of the outcomes of this crisis management approach is that First Nation people have not had the resources to deliver prevention and early intervention programs or the opportunity to evaluate how the adoption of First Nation children can be delivered differently based on a First Nation perspective.There is much to learn about First Nation approaches to programs such as adoption, however without these programs in place this information is lacking.

A critical review of Alberta's policy also must include an examination of the recent changes to the adoption system in Alberta and the potential impact of the new *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*, particularly as it pertains to First Nation adoptees. The current policy framework suggests that now it is easier "for adopted children and their birth parents to search for biological family members, and then arrange a reunion if they wish" (www.gov.ab.ca/adoptionrecords.ca). For example, starting November 1, 2004, adult adoptees 18 years of age or older and birth parents can receive identifying information (e.g., name, address, date of birth) about each other. This policy applies to all adoptions that occurred in Alberta before January 1, 2005. The Alberta government also may release non-identifying information, such as physical descriptions and family medical information. However, this information can be blocked by both adoptees and birth parents by filling out a disclosure veto with Alberta's Post Adoption Registry. If a veto is registered on file, adult adoptees and birth parents will continue to receive non-identifying information if this is requested. The veto becomes null and void if the person who filed it dies. Adoptees who are turning 18 have six months to file a veto and birth parents will not receive information about the adoptee until six months after the adoptee turns 18. Another change is that all adoptions granted in Alberta after January 1,

2005 will have open records. Identifying information cannot be protected by a veto, but contact preferences may be filed (Alberta Children's Services Adoption Regulations, 2005). However, preferences are not legally binding. Only two other Canadian provinces, British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador, have opened their adoption records.[3]

On the surface, these changes appear to be a positive step in adoption law and practice. However, adoption advocacy groups have been critical of these changes. For example, in a letter to the Alberta government in 2003, the Adoption Council of Canada (ACC) maintained that the changes are missing an important step in addressing fundamental adoption issues and made specific reference to a legislative amendment that provides adoptive parents with the right to deny adoptees with the knowledge that they are adopted. The ACC (2003) argues that the new legislation is both "progressive" and "regressive" and will impact adult adoptees and the entire adoption community negatively. In particular, the ACC believes the new provisions further entrench the rights of adoptive parents over the rights of adoptees. In response to the ACC, the Minister of Alberta Children's Services explained that adoptive parents have withheld this information in "rare and unique situations" and that the department would consider the ACC's concerns when it was time to discuss policy and procedures (ACC, 2003).

The Minister's response is disconcerting. To suggest that the ACC's concerns will be addressed in policy and procedures is bureaucratic rhetoric. Policies and procedures descend from legislation and do not stray far from the original intent of legislation. Although social workers can apply a "creative" interpretation of policy and procedures, as previously discussed, social workers cannot risk breaking the law for such creativity.

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[3] British Columbia opened their records in 1996. Newfoundland and Labrador opened their records in 2004.

With respect to the implications for Aboriginal children, the new legislation does not make reference to First Nation or Aboriginal children. Yet, ignoring the matter does not make it disappear. In fact, the culturally biased notion of *best interest* is further entrenched and the rights of Aboriginal children from a collective and cultural perspective continue to be ignored. Based on the findings of this study, which will be discussed later, this silence appears to be one of the most serious flaws in the new legislation. By not acknowledging First Nation children and adoption, the legislation cannot resolve issues about adoption and First Nation children.

Themes in Adoption Literature Relevant to this Study

Connectedness

Since connectedness is a central theme in the literature that has informed this study, this part of the review begins with a discussion about aspects of connectedness and adoption. While an analysis of connectedness, adoption and the health of First Nation adoptees is not found in the literature, several researchers have focused on some aspects of connectedness and adoption (Borders, Penny and Portnoy, 2000; Boss, 1999; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Hendry &Reid, 2000; Lee & Draper, 2001). In examining connectedness specifically, Borders et al. (2000) found that more adoptees than a comparison group were "insecure and fearful avoidant" (p.416) and concluded that "adult adoptees have meaningful stories to tell, and these stories could greatly inform clinicians, educators, and policymakers, as well as adoptive and birth parents (p.416). Brodzinsky and Schechter (1990) also explored the issue of connectedness from a psychological perspective and stated that, "with the psychological need to separate, pushed by the biological changes of adolescence, the dissonances and differences for the

adoptee are highlighted and eventually create, in our view, a driven need to experience human connectedness" (p.85).

This is supported by Hendry and Reid (2000) who found that connectedness or "belonging to a community of others" (p.706) acted as a deterrent in adolescent adoptees for high-risk behaviors, such as poor body image, a high degree of emotional stress, poly-drug use, school absenteeism, or risk of injury or pregnancy. Lee, Lee and Draper (2001) discovered similar findings when examining the relationship between psychological well-being and connectedness. They found that "people with low connectedness often experience loneliness, anxiety, jealousy, anger, depression, low self-esteem, and a host of other negative emotions" (2001, p.311). Both of these studies reveal high-risk behaviors associated with a lack of connectedness to community. Connectedness to family has also been explored (March, 1995; Resnick, Harris & Blum, 1993; Slap, Goodman & Huang, 2001). Resnick, Harris and Blum (1993) describe family connectedness as one of the most powerful protective factors in the well-being of adolescents (p.380). Moreover, Slap, Goodman and Huang (2001) propose that family connectedness can reduce the risk of suicide among adolescent adoptees (p.2). March (1995) describes the act of searching as *intimate* since it considers the part of self denied to adoptees through non-disclosure. This has an impact on feeling connected to the rest of the world....By gaining access to their genealogical and genetic background, searching adoptees neutralize their sense of feeling different through adoption" (p.74). In other words, searching for family enhances an adoptee's sense of connectedness. Molloy (2002) supports this by describing a follow-up study with adult adoptees. He proposes that connectedness is a sense of continuity which is completed only by a sense of a beginning and an ending (p.271).

While these studies identify the significance of family connectedness for well-being, Resnick et al. and Slap et al. do not examine these issues from the perspective of different cultural groups. Furthermore, these studies do not give adequate consideration to race or gender analysis and in particular do not address the issue of connectedness and First Nation adoptees.

Boss (1999) also addresses the issue of health and connectedness through her work with immigrant children. She writes that when "the psychological family is not in accord with the physically present family," a state of ambiguity is created, which Boss refers to as *ambiguous loss* (p.3-4). This sense of loss results in frozen grief, which may result in characteristics, such as depression, anxiety and/or somatic illnesses, backaches, headaches and stomach ailments (p.10). Boss concludes that often when people are separated from their family of origin, the family that exists in people's minds is more important than the one they live with.

Boss's conclusion supports Rillera's (1987) assertion that adoptees feel connected to people they do not even know. They go through motions of life with "a cellular consciousness of the experience" (1987, p.39) similar to the *blood memory* described by Anderson (2000). Cellular memory explored in a spiritual context may be the calling of the ancestors, which enhances the feeling that one needs to search for a missing piece in one's life. Atkinson (2004) describes cellular memory and collective consciousness as ways of knowing that connects us to our ancestors (87). While Wolin (1993) proposes that children can rise above the disconnection from family and endear themselves to others, Brodzinsky and Schechter (1990) point out that this may be a case of attachment, but not assimilation. For Brodzinsky and Schechter, attachment is an emotional bond to

the adoptive family while assimilation is a state of integrating the adoptive family's characteristics and worldview. In other words, children may appear to be well adjusted and integrated into a family, but may have a deep internal drive to detach and seek a reason for being, or as one adoptee in Brodzinsky and Schechter's study explains "to know I wasn't hatched" (1990, p.85). This points to the importance of adopted children experiencing a sense of balance in their lives through attachment and integration and to the need for adoption policy to encourage both these experiences.

. The gap in the literature on connectedness, health and First Nation adoption creates an opportunity for this present study to offer some valid contributions to adoption and First Nation children. What has been discussed however is the importance of connectedness and kinship for First Nation people.

The Role of Kinship and Connectedness for First Nation Adoptees

From a Western worldview, kinship has been studied and described by cultural anthropologists who have focused on patterns of behavior, language and cultural norms. However, two critical questions posed for application to this study are: What is kinship from a First Nation perspective? How can the importance of kinship inform this study?

Red Horse, Martinez, Day, Day, Poupart and Scharnberg (2000) state that Indian family preservation is linked fundamentally to tribal sovereignty and state that history and tradition are important components of kinship, which is necessary to the survival of American Indian families. Other indigenous scholars concur (Littlebear, 2000; Youngblood Henderson, 2000; Yeo, 2003). Littlebear (2000) describes kinship as a "spider-web of relations" (p.79) and explains how extended families are interconnected circles that include social and religious functions, based on wholeness with the strength

of providing balance, and that "from the moment of birth, children are the objects of love and kindness from a large circle of relatives and friends" (p.81). Within this worldview, kinship extends beyond human kinship to include kinship with the natural world. For example, this ecological view of kinship categorizes social obligations, such as reciprocity in relationship with plants and animals. Youngblood Henderson (2000) states that within this kinship system, "plants, animals, and humans are related, and each is both a producer and a consumer with respect to the other, in an endless cycle" (p.257). Furthermore, Henderson states that this order of kinship "implies a distinct form of responsibilities or rights" and includes the obligation "to provide childhood experiences of collective support and attention combined with self-discipline and responsibilities to create a personality that is cooperative and independent, self-restrained yet individualistic, attuned to the feelings of others but nonintrusive" (2000, p.260). This *sacred order* of the universe implies that as human beings, we have kinship relationships that transcend the Western notion of the nuclear family.

Similarly, anthropological research suggests a kinship hypothesis in which the social roots of adoption are designed to strengthen ties rather than to sever them. De Aguayo (1995) notes that anthropologists have "found that all societies have terms to address each other, particularly kin" and that kin roles dictate how persons interact with each other (p.9). In these societies "adoption links close families even more closely" (p.9). This finding demonstrates a distinction in the worldview of adoption in Western and tribal societies. Worldview in a non-Western sense is formulated by experiencing an ecosystem (Bandura, 2003; Bevis, 1985). Based on this assumption, one could argue that the role of kinship for adoptees is to provide balance. This balance stems from knowing

one's family and history, but it also can influence the recognition of one's place and responsibility in the universe. Furthermore, this balance implies that retaining kinship ties is part of overall community health and strength. Yeo (2003) contributes to this concept in stating that "The Aboriginal sense of self arises as a consequence of kinship bonds and communal life" (in *J.Child Abuse Review, Sept/Oct. 2003, Vol 12, Issue 5,* p.294) As discussed earlier, kinship implies the importance of connectedness to relationships broader than the immediate family. Ross (1996) suggests that healing from unhealthy relationships begins with the realization "that life is a relationship and that acting in individualistic defiance of that reality will only lead everyone downhill" (p.137). Ross implies that the sooner we realize that connection to others is a natural and healthy dynamic in our lives, the more whole we become.

Other Themes in Adoption Literature: Assumptions for Policy and Practice

The literature review continues with some prominent themes in the literature on adoption that relate to this study. This includes the literature that has provided some common assumptions in the development of adoption policy and practice

Abandonment is a common thread in the life of an adoptee and those in this study spoke in terms of being left behind or forgotten. The literature on *Attachment* is vast, however some of it is highlighted as a developmental issue that can enhance the healthy development of an adopted child. In this study it is also important to explore the difference between connectedness and attachment. The literature on cross-cultural adoption draws parallels to the adoption of First Nation children in non Aboriginal adoptive homes. As fifteen of the adoptees in this study were in non Aboriginal homes, this literature becomes an important source to return to in the analysis of findings.

Finally, the literature on identity is important, as critics of transracial and Aboriginal adoption have discussed identity as the major loss for children adopted cross-culturally. The discussion on identity is framed in the larger cross-cultural context as well as addressing specific issues related to identity and First Nation children.

Abandonment

The literature on abandonment suggests that this is a prominent theme for adopted children (Braga, 2004; Carlini, 1993; Coles, 2004; Connolly, 2002; Malloy 2002; Menard, 1997; Verrier, 1994). The relevance of this body of literature is that a number of adoptees in this study spoke of a sense of being given away, forgotten or *abandoned* by their birth family.The current literature on abandonment is focused on international adoption where children may be literally abandoned in a variety of public places and orphanages (Braga, 2004). This discussion highlights other complex issues related to abandonment. A report by the National Adoption Clearinghouse (2004) states the following:

> However, even when adoptive parents say all the right things, such as "your birthmother was not able to care for you and she wanted you to have the best home possible," some children who have been adopted have strong feelings of abandonment. They think that since their mothers abandoned them, others in their lives will also abandon them. As a result, as adults they do not expect much from other relationships. They may fear rejection, have trouble making commitments, and avoid intimacy. Intimate relationships, in fact, can be quite difficult for some men and women who have been adopted. Fears about abandonment and low self-esteem often lead them to sabotage their relationships. They may perceive this as the only way to insulate themselves from being abandoned again. (p.1)

Abandonment obviously may have some far-reaching emotional consequences. There is an implicit assumption in the literature on abandonment and adoption that a child experiences life long trauma as a result of being separated from his/her mother at birth. The central notion here is that the birth mother has abandoned her child rather than

creating an opportunity for her child (Carlini, 1993; Malloy, 2002; Verrier, 1994). Carlini (1993) examines *adoptee trauma*, which she argues begins at birth and is the separation of the child from the birth mother. This experience creates painful birth memories of disconnection for the child and becomes a powerful force in the life of an adoptee (p.19). Verrier (1994), who wrote *The Primal Wound, Understanding the Adopted Child,* supports Carlini's work. Verrier describes the *primal wound* as a wound that is physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual, creating an experience so painful that some adoptees have claimed it becomes cellular. As a result, the child experiences a life-long sense of separation from the mother, an essential relationship which is described as "mysterious, spiritual and everlasting" (Verrier, 1994, p.10). Connolly (2002) examines the contradictions in adoption and illustrates the meaning of adoption for a birth mother and an adoptive family by writing: "He's *theirs* in a way that can never be hers and he's *hers* in a way that can never be theirs" (p.6). She also describes the feelings of a birth mother who has relinquished her son for adoption: "She is his mother, an unalterable, irrefutable, unending awareness, wondering, missing. How strange that one can miss utterly someone who one has known only briefly. It was and is the quality of the knowing that makes the absence so intense" (Connolly, 2002, p.7). In reading this passage, one can appreciate that birth mothers also feel a huge sense of loss and guilt related to 'abandoning' their child. If only she was able to explain this to her child in some manner prior to the potential damage caused by feelings of abandonment. This presents a gender bias in adoption in that the action of birth mothers, who often relinquish children due to extreme poverty or other circumstances beyond their control, is compounded by what

society views as competent parenting (Yeo, 2003). Gender bias in the adoption literature on abandonment also affects birth fathers.

Since birth fathers are discussed by the adoptees in this study, this is a relevant body of literature to be explored. Menard (1997) advises that there is much research to be done in the area of birth fathers and adoption and encourages prenatal social workers to be attentive to the needs of birth fathers when facilitating the adoption process. In *Ever After,* Coles (2004) explores what he calls *father's grief* or issues faced by birth fathers. He describes identity as a core issue in adoption and explains its impact on birth fathers who grieve for the identity of their children. Coles also objects to conceptual models of adoption that use circles or triangles because "they imply a neat symmetry, a balance, with no complex network of relationships, some linear, many indirect" (2004, p.79). Coles' work informs the structure of model conceptualization for this study and also informs the process of analysis of findings which address connection and birth family issues.

Framed within the context of race and gender, it becomes apparent that the issue of abandonment requires further exploration. For example, what are the issues related to abandonment from a First Nation perspective? Are there specific issues that stem from the loss of culture and extended family and a lack of connection to one's ancestors? Abandonment is a complex issue and may be related to several factors, including the birth experience itself, the manner in which the adoption is facilitated, and the manner in which an adopted child is parented by an adopted family. For First Nation children, the issue of abandonment can be connected to a number of other variables that are cultural and spiritual in nature. However, the data on First Nation adoption are limited, making it

difficult to draw strong conclusions about abandonment in the context of First Nation adoption. In support of Horner's (2000) call "for a permanent forum through which the results of research on adoption can be disseminated effectively" (p.477), this study will explore abandonment and other issues that have an impact on First Nation adoption.

Attachment

Leading scholars on attachment have had great influence on adoption. Bowlby (1969), who first applied this idea to the infant-caregiver bond, believed that the human baby, like the young of most animal species, is equipped with a set of built-in behaviors that helps keep the parent nearby, increasing the chances that the infant will be protected from danger. According to Bowlby, the infant's relationship to the parent begins as a set of innate signals which lets the parents know the baby needs their attention. Bowlby's theory is that through this experience, children form an affectional bond with their caregivers that becomes the basis for future relationships during infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adult life.

The literature on attachment primarily describes attachment in dyadic terms for a child. Dozier and Albus (2000) examine attachment theory in relation to adoption. In a section of their work entitled, *Adult State of Mind*, the authors assert that experience with attachment as an infant can affect the parenting of one's own child. Various states of mind exist when correlating patterns of response. For example, adults who are characterized as "dismissing," typically minimize their infant's needs for attachment and thus behave in ways that are perceived by their children as rejecting (Dozier and Albus, 2000, p.176). Based on this description, one can surmise that a child needs to be *attached*

to a central figure or a dyadic parental arrangement. But, this central assumption is contrary to indigenous thought about relationships with family, land and community.

The current state of knowledge on attachment, as it refers to Aboriginal children has been explored by a variety of scholars (De Aguayo, 1995; McCormick, 1997; Richard, 2004; Sinclair, Macdonald, Trevethan, Auger, & Moore, 2001; Yeo, 2003). De Aguayo (1995) contributed research to Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to inform public policy on adoption and First Nation children. Her research included a background paper on customary adoption that "reviews the limited ethnographic literature concerning Aboriginal Customary Adoption in Canada" (De Aguayo, 1995, p.1). De Aguayo finds that there is no discussion about attachment in these customary practices that "emphasizes the sentiment, authority-structures, symbols, and networks of family rather than the procreative functions of family" and cautions about the dangers of reformulating customary adoption practices within a Eurocentric framework in which issues, such as attachment, are highly valued (1995, p.31-32).

McCormick (1997) has undertaken an analysis of attachment theory as it relates to First Nation children. He concludes that First Nation people do not share the same concepts of attachment as those of Western culture and that First Nation child rearing practices have changed and traditional family structures have been eroded through colonization. He encourages the use of traditional ceremonies such as a Vision Quest to encourage young persons to attach themselves to nature and to a higher power such as the Great Spirit (1997, p.6). Richard (2004) observes that the literature on attachment is "reinforced by a generic knowledge base informed almost exclusively through the study of non Aboriginal children and families" (p.104). He also suggests that, "while bonding is

believed by many to be an accurate predictor of adoption success, no studies carried out with Aboriginal children in adoptive homes can be referenced to substantiate this belief" (p.104). Sinclair, Macdonald, Trevethan, Auger, and Moore (2001) conducted a study with Aboriginal inmates in seven prairie institutions. Their study, *The Effect of Family Disruption on Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Inmates,* examines attachment to a primary caregiver as a preventative factor in maladaptive and antisocial behaviour. Based on interviews with Aboriginal inmates and extensive file reviews, Sinclair et al. conclude that attachment to a primary caregiver did not prevent or decrease criminal activity. However, the researchers found that "63% of Aboriginal inmates interviewed said they had been adopted or placed in foster or group homes at some point in their childhood compared to 36% of non-Aboriginal inmates" (2001, p.18). This experience set the context for many factors to influence criminal activity, such as the number of placements, the abuse suffered in these placements, and exposure to other youth involved in criminal activity. Sinclair et al. report that the research on attachment as it relates to Aboriginal children is limited. While adoption or foster care separates Aboriginal children from their family, they believe this experience also involves "separation from the Aboriginal culture and community" (Sinclair et al., 2001, p.8), which to date has not been explored in the literature on attachment. Yeo (2003) conducted a study on attachment and Aboriginal children in Australia and concludes that assessment is one problematic area with attachment and adoption. She states that "current assessments or the bonding and attachment of Aboriginal children have provided an ethnocentric view based on Anglo-Celtic values" (p.293).

In order to examine some parallels with other cultures, the literature on international adoption is reviewed for its content on attachment theory. Experts on international adoption (Groza, 1997; Honer, 2000) concur with researchers who have explored attachment theory and Aboriginal children. Groza (1997), a leading expert on international adoption, explains that attachment theory leads to an inaccurate set of diagnoses and treatment programs when children are labelled with conditions such as Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) or a host of other attachment problems. It is inaccurate as these disorders are described mainly in terms of the child being unattached to parent figures rather than a broad spectrum of other issues which impact attachment (p.9). Simply labelling children as "unattached," argues Groza, only places adoptive parents on the defensive, leading them to believe there is something wrong with their child and with them (1997, p.9). Groza also concludes that children who tend to suffer with attachment problems tend to be from other countries and have been institutionalized at an early age or who suffer from prenatal drug or alcohol exposure. Horner (2000), taking a stronger position than Groza, disputes the whole notion of RAD and finds that there is very little empirical evidence for the way in which attachment and bonding between adopted children and their adoptive parents can be facilitated. Horner further notes that "the literature seems limited to suggestions that parents can better meet the needs of their child by being more sensitive, accepting and caring" (2000, p.476). Horner's conclusions are thought provoking as they pertain to First Nation children and adoption. He gets at the heart of the matter in situations where the adoption of First Nation children breaks down for non-Aboriginal adoptive parents. Some adoptive parents, including those who participated in this study, felt inadequate and questioned

themselves, wondering what else they could have done. The inability to answer to these questions or to provide alternative strategies for parents is, as Horner observes, a weakness in the current research on attachment.

In summary, attachment theory does not reflect adequately the diverse experiences with attachment and First Nation adoptees. Attachment to parental figures is based on Western concepts of parenting and adoption. From an ecological perspective, some other key environmental conditions that influence attachment are missing, such as the impact of culture, spirituality, history and identity. The adoptees who participated in this study provide a number of insights in this area. This validates the importance of this study which explores the relationship between connectedness and health for First Nation adoptees. Connectedness may be described as a form of attachment and implies a broader grounding in a person's total environment rather than attachment to one or two central figures. For these reasons, a study on connectedness for First Nation children and adoption is perhaps more appropriate than further studies from an attachment theoretical framework. It was important however to explore the literature on attachment to determine its relevance in this study and to provide a context in how attachment differs or is similar to connectedness.

Cross-Cultural Adoption and Identity

The literature on cross-cultural adoptions offers an opportunity for a comparative analysis of First Nation adoption and identity. Identity is a complex notion (Friedlander, 1999; Hanagan, Scaggs, Heitfield, 2001; Hollingsworth, 1999; Kapp, McDonald & Diamond, 2001; Kluger, et.al., 2001; Lee, 2003). Friedlander (1999), observing the existence of gaps in the literature on adjustment issues for children from other countries,

examines several studies undertaken by other researchers on adopted children of color. In longitudinal studies with Korean adoptees, it was discovered that as adolescents, these adoptees identified primarily with White society. African American adoptees were more likely than other adoptees to see themselves as bi-racial (Feigleman and Silverman as cited in Friedlander, 1999). Friedlander (1999), noting the need to separate *race* from *ethnicity* in research, examines issues of ethnic identity in the adoptions of children from various ethnic groups (p.45). Friedlander (1999) concludes that, on average, studies demonstrate that transracially and internationally adopted children do not differ in adjustment or self-esteem from domestically adopted children in same race families when they are adopted in early life. Pride and ethnic identity appear to be related to parental attitudes, and transracially adopted children appear to have more pride in their ethnic background than non-adopted children of color or adopted children in same-race families. However, Friedlander acknowledges a need for further research on issues, such as ethnic identity and psychological well-being.

Hollingsworth (1999) also wrote about transracial adoption for African American children. In her article, she cites the National Association of Black Social Workers (N.A.B.S.W.) who, in 1972, developed a resolution to advocate for Black children being placed in Black families only. According to Hollingsworth, the resolution was controversial due to the language in their position which advocated for an end of cultural genocide in statements such as "the need for our young ones to begin at birth to identify with Black people in a Black community" (p.2). Hollingsworth proposes that the N.A.B.S.W. members were examining this issue from the perspective of symbolic interaction in which relationship with others inspires the meaning of self (p.5). These

social workers wanted to ensure that Black children were not cut off from healthy development as Black people due to their experience in a transracial adoptive home (p.5).

Kapp, McDonald and Diamond (2001) report an over-representation of African American children in out of home placements who suffer from disparities in treatment during and as a result of these placements. Kapp et al. report that when African American children are placed in same-race adoptive homes, they are less likely to be maltreated, and more likely to have positive outcomes. Kapp et al.'s work takes place in the state of Kansas where there are a high number of African American children living in out of home arrangements. Kapp et al.'s findings reveal that African American children take longer to be adopted, and a high number are placed with family. They also found that these children may not always be placed with their siblings and that there is a need for more African American practitioners in the area of adoption. Kapp et al. call for more research in this area, particularly focused on social, psychological, cultural and systemic factors so that "research efforts may be more capable of offering insights to guide innovations which directly address the inequitable trends faced by African American children in the process of being adopted" (2001, p. 227).

Lee (2003) describes *cultural socialization outcome studies* as "an emerging area of study that attempts to understand the racial and ethnic experiences of transracial adoptees and their families that promote or hinder racial/ethnic identity development and to examine directly the relationship between these experiences and psychological adjustment" (p. 719). In his review of the literature, Lee suggests that there is "a lack of formal theory specific to transracial adoptive families" (p.724) and that researchers typically "failed to distinguish between the unique racial experiences of domestic and

international transracial adoptions" (p.725). Hanigan, Scaggs & Heitfield concur in stating that "in the case of transracial adoption, there have been different standards used to define what constitutes a positive racial or ethnic identity for transracially adopted children" (p.4).

In summary, the literature on inter-country and transracial adoption provides interesting and thought-provoking parallels in the adoption of First Nation children. This includes adjustment, self-esteem, experiences with racism and identity issues, however in accordance with Lee (2003), there remains a gap in domestic transracial adoption research such as First Nation adoption. Interestingly, the arguments used by critics of inter-country or transracial adoption are similar to those used by First Nation advocates for adoption reform. These critics argue that children "will lose their cultural roots, resulting in a confused identity" (Kluger et al. 2001, p.257). Inter-country adoptees may leave siblings and other family members behind, people they are unlikely to see again until middle adulthood, if at all. According to the literature this has an impact on their identity but not always a negative impact (Friedlander,1999; Howe, 2000) Friedlander (1999) for example describes that adoption in early life is a factor in determining the success of transracial adoption. He also names other factors such as parental attitude. This provides an important factor to consider in this study on First Nation adoption.

Identity and First Nation Adoption

The issue of identity has been discussed as a prevalent issue in cross cultural and First Nation adoption literature and is a theme in this study. It is important to understand the importance of tribal identity in order to recognize the impact of separation or

disconnection from tribal knowledge and connection for First Nation children. Cajete (2000) explains that:

> Relationship is the cornerstone of tribal community, and the nature and expression of community is the foundation of tribal identity. Through community, Indian people come to understand their "personhood" and their connection to the communal soul of their people. (p.86)

In a recent article published in *Adoption and Ethics* (2000), the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) attempts to analyze the *National Indian Child Welfare Act* as it relates to race, culture and identity. The CWLA states that, "although race and culture have played important roles in the adoption of African American, Latino and other children of colour, culture – by virtue of both history and legislative action, it has played a unique role in the adoption of American Indian children in the U.S." (2000, p.57). The *National Indian Child Welfare Act* (NICWA) recognizes the importance of Indian children's cultural heritage and was enacted to "halt the systematic separation of Indian children from their families and cultural communities" (CWLA, 2000, p.57).

The CWLA also discusses the work of some prominent American researchers in this area. For example, Fanshel (as cited in CWLA, 2000) reports that outcomes for Indian children adopted by Caucasian families are related to problem areas of personality rather than structural or systemic issues. In other words, the dynamics of poor matching resulting in strained relationships and personality conflicts are more crucial to the wellbeing of children than any other systemic malfunction. Fulcher (2002) asserts that child welfare authorities with a duty of caring for the health and well-being of children need to produce services that guarantee *cultural safety*, which Fulcher defines as "the acknowledgement of and attendance to a child's needs and cultural frame of reference" (p.689).

Yeo (2003) states that "Spirituality is the cornerstone of identity" for Aboriginal children (p.294). Practitioners who have advocated for adult First Nation adoptees concur. In their study, *An Evaluation of the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program* (Bennett, 2001), researchers interviewed First Nation adoptees who have been repatriated to their family and community. A notable response among a majority of interviewees was that they felt that it was important to know about their ancestral background (2001, p.31). One of the most common reasons that First Nation adoptees wanted to be reconnected to family and community was to gain "official recognition of who they are, as an Indian person" (2001, p.14).[4]

Anderson (2000) illustrates her search for her identity as an Aboriginal woman who grew up away from her family and community. She describes how she struggled with increased knowledge about Aboriginal people, especially while taking university classes and examining issues from the voice and writings of others. Anderson proposes a theory of identity formation for Aboriginal people that includes four steps: (1) resisting definitions of being *or* rejecting negative stereotypes, (2) reclaiming Aboriginal tradition, (3) constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context, and (4) acting (e.g., using one's voice) on a new positive identity (p.229).

Kral (2003) discusses identity in his study on meanings of well-being in Inuit communities. He notes that Aboriginal people have *collective selves* and that "collective selves see group membership as central to their identity whereas individualistic selves are more autonomous from any particular group and may value individualism quite highly" (2003, p.8). This collective worldview values kinship as the foundation of social life.

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[4] Some of the adoptees interviewed for this present study were involved with the Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program. As such, some of the findings in this study replicate the findings from the *Evaluation of the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program.*

Kral proposes that in Inuit communities, kinship is viewed as an important area of traditional knowledge. The importance of family and kinship was the most prominent theme across Kral's 90 interviews with Inuit people who explained that this connection was a determinant of well-being and prevention.

Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler and Esau (2000) challenge the argument that adoption policies related to confidentiality enable a severing of ties with birth families in order to promote attachment to adoptive parents (p.379). Grotevant et al., in support of other researchers, refute this notion and, in particular, the pretence that adoptive parents can replace biological parents by erasing all existing pertinent information about the biological parents. Grotevant et al. conclude that changing policy can challenge this assumption and that an openness in adoption likely will have an impact on a variety of complex adoption issues, including identity formation, which they describe as "central to the emerging understanding of adoptive identity" (2000, p.385). Grotevant et al. also identify a need for further research in adoption and, in particular, investigation into the diverse social contexts that can influence identity formation.

In summary, the complexity of identity as it relates to adoption and First Nation children is enhanced by various political and legal dynamics. For example, what would be the impact on adoption policy and practice for First Nation children if culture and identity were viewed as protective factors for resilience? Indigenous scholars have proposed that individual identity is inseparable from the collective identity of Aboriginal people (Anderson, 2000; Bennett, 2001; Brendtro, Brokenleg ,Bockern, 1990; Kral, 2003). Some of the adoptees in this study spoke at length about identity confusion and the

need to reconstruct themselves from a continual flow of new information as they met their extended family members.

First Nation Health

In recent years, a growing number of reports on health and Aboriginal people have been released (Canadian Institute of Child Health, 2000; Health Canada, 2003; National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2003; Provincial Health Council of Alberta, 1998; Royal Commission Report, 1996; Solicitor General's Report, 2001). Health Canada (2003) reports that First Nation people have poorer health conditions that the general population in Canada which warrants continued attention by research and policy makers (p.3). The significance of the *Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples* is the attention it focused on a number of issues facing Aboriginal communities throughout Canada. This included several recommendations regarding the importance of *whole health* for Aboriginal people that addresses "the four pillars of an individual's being: spirit, mind, body and emotions" (1996, p.156). The Report stresses that "unless a holistic approach is taken, the despair that has gripped Aboriginal communities will not let go" (1996, p.156). Moreover, the Canadian Institute of Child Health in *The Health of Canada's Children* (2000) identifies the dearth of information on the health of Aboriginal children as a serious weakness in the literature. As a preface to their conclusions, they write:

> The literature on Aboriginal health research relies primarily upon two sources: first, knowledge derived from the health delivery system and second, current research studies. Both sources exhibit certain strengths and weaknesses when applied to understanding the health status of Aboriginal children and youth. (2000, p.145)

This lack of information also extends into the mental health system where the gaps in information about Aboriginal mental health are the most glaring. The Solicitor General of Canada's *Report: A Guide for Health Professionals Working with Aboriginal Peoples* (2001) details a variety of statistics related to health. On the specific topic of mental health, the Report describes that diagnosis and classification of mental health issues using western medical definitions poses a challenge for health professionals and that Aboriginal health issues must be placed in a context of "adverse socio-economic circumstances" (p.8).

The Provincial Health Council of Alberta (1998) released a report undertaken by a task force on Aboriginal health. The Report, based on interviews with representatives from Aboriginal communities, indicates that participants spoke of personal and collective grief as the source of many of the health problems experienced by Aboriginal people (p.21). The National Aboriginal Health Organization (2003) supports this view of Aboriginal health and states that, "good health involves more than being free of disease or living longer. It includes having a strong body, a mind able to learn and to accept change, a heart that is open and caring and a spirit that is clear and connected to all that is around us" (p.4). This statement reflects some important principles in Aboriginal health and also points to the significance of connectedness in our lives as a means to maintain good health.

The literature addressing First Nation health issues relevant to this study is focused in a holistic framework of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health discussions. The examination from these various vantage points includes discussion of mental health and First Nation people.

Mental and Emotional Health

Recent data released by Alberta Health and Wellness and the University of Alberta Public Health Sciences (2004) indicate that First Nations people were seeking help at higher rates than the general population for mental health problems primarily through physicians, emergency rooms, and hospital admissions rather than mental health outpatient clinics. These data also disclosed that one of the greatest challenges for Aboriginal mental health in Alberta is to "balance the needs of diverse populations of Aboriginal clients accessing mental health" (Alberta Health and Wellness, 2004, p.25). Family violence, suicide, and substance abuse problems are common among Aboriginal peoples in Alberta. Alberta Health and Wellness (2004) reports that:

> Within First Nations people, the main reasons for physician visits were anxiety, affective disorders (depression), substance abuse disorders, childhood/adolescence disorders, and schizophrenia. (p.17)

Furthermore, the Report advocates for a holistic system since "First Nation people consider health and wellness to be a state of balance between mind, body, spirit and emotions" (2004, p.25). Recently, the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO), which provides a valuable service of informing the public about Aboriginal health issues, has initiated discussions with national Aboriginal organizations to develop an Aboriginal Mental Health Policy (2004).

The report concludes that anxiety is the main reason for First Nation people to visit a physician. The report also describes a list of dominant negative forces that places First Nation people in a particular vulnerable position in the overall health care system. Berry (1999) suggests that the experience of colonization and multiple forms of abuse is

what differentiates First Nation people from other patients when addressing their health needs.

Many of the mental health issues facing Aboriginal peoples today are rooted in historical and socio-economic factors. Family violence including physical and sexual abuse is often the reason for referrals to mental health centers and hospitals and can be related directly to the historical legacy of Aboriginal people, such as the residential school system. Suicide among Aboriginal peoples, but more specifically among Aboriginal youth, is of major concern provincially and nationally. Some studies estimate the average rate of youth suicide is eight times higher than the national average in some Aboriginal communities. Health Canada (2003) reports that:

> It is true that First Nations and Inuit people have historically had a poorer health status than other Canadians. Infectious diseases, injuries, suicides, heart disease and diabetes affect the Aboriginal population at a disproportionate rate. And while there have been improvements in the life expectancy and infant mortality of Aboriginal people in recent years, their health status remains far below that of the general population. As a result it continues to be an important focus for researchers and policy makers. (p.6)

This implies that Aboriginal health research is a national priority; however the literature also indicates that there are gaps in specific areas of health which need particular attention. Currently, the diagnosis of mental illness and mental disorders of individuals are completed by physicians, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals using the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual, 4th Edition (DSM- IV)* developed by the American Psychiatric Association. The manual is grounded in western science and is based on a disease-oriented model that focuses on the individual. Mental illness cannot be viewed only from this western medical model if a holistic approach is a viable option in the mental health of First Nation people. The diagnostic approach ignores the

traditional teachings that Elders have given us in terms of the whole person's health. Dr. Joe Couture, a psychologist and Alberta Elder, provides the following teaching:

> As we turn into the 21st century, there are a great number of people healing themselves. Dreams instruct us, guide us and teach us. We need to use humor in developing our identity. Using our extended family systems to address issues such as the Hollow Water project in Manitoba. We need to look at disease differently as something to learn from. When people still have something or lessons to learn, they may develop disease. We may see sadness and terminal illnesses that stem from this. There are theories of personality in mental health work and 456 religions in the world – religions that define meanings. All indigenous people who are connected to the earth however have relational beliefs about creation (Alberta Mental Health Board, 2004, p.11).

Zouner (2003) conducted work with First Nation people to acquire a perspective on mental health services. She states, "to really understand a First Nation person's worldview, you have to take a genuine step over to their side and see things from their perspective" (p.109). This is part of the rationale for the methodology in this study on adoption and First Nation people. The literature on mental and emotional health of First Nation people indicates the need to address these issues from a position that acknowledges historical trauma and marginalization of First Nation people while looking at solutions that are flexible enough to meet the needs of different geographical and culturally diverse First Nation communities.

Physical Health

What do we know about the physical health of First Nation people? Elias, O'Neil and Sanderson (2004) propose that "the literature on First Nation health is dominated by pathologizing discourses" (p. 77). However, there has been some important and relevant research conducted on First Nation health. As pointed out by a number of indigenous scholars and others, solutions to First Nation issues must be developed by and with First

Nation people in order to increase effectiveness with the First Nation population. The following literature on Aboriginal health also emphasizes this point.

The Canadian Population Health Initiative (2004) states, "the social, economic and environmental conditions of Aboriginal people are worse than those of non-Aboriginal people. These include education, work status, income, housing, water and sewage systems and nutritional options that are readily available and affordable" (p.90). These conditions impact the ability of Aboriginal communities to address many of the social determinants of health, which in turn impact the health of people. Cultural safety, which ensures that cultural needs are respected in health care, cultural awareness and positive imaging need to be promoted. In other words, there is strength and resilience in First Nation communities that need to be supported in spite of economic and socio-cultural challenges.

This is consistent with other findings that have been discussed in the literature on Aboriginal health. Waldram, Herring and Young (2002) state, "the decimation and extinction of many indigenous peoples is a matter of historical fact, initiated by a cascade of interwoven sociopolitical, economic, and ecological changes" (p.43). These authors explain that marginalization resulting from colonial impact has affected the Aboriginal population in Canada. However, we need to stop looking at solutions that continue to place Aboriginal people in a victimized passive state and as "culturally crippled," but rather address Aboriginal health from a culturally competent stance (p. 271). A major theme in the report of The Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) was the desire of Aboriginal people to look at health holistically (Aboriginal Health Issues Committee, 2001, p.2) and to be included in decision-making that affects their health.

The Canadian Institute for Health Research, Institute of Aboriginal People's Health Annual Report (2002) identifies some of the health challenges for Aboriginal people, such as diabetes and substance abuse. However, it also draws attention to the number of initiatives in Canada that are engaged in promoting indigenous health care and services. Although the report points out that "fear of racism and stigmatization also hold back some Aboriginal people from using the mainstream health care system," (p.21) it also advocates for the increased awareness of Aboriginal health issues by all Canadians and supports many initiatives that include community-based approaches and solutions. In this study, participants had a number of ideas and recommendations for improving outcomes for First Nation adoptees. Processes to engage people in these solution-focused dialogues can move systems, such as the health system and the First Nation child and family service system, into action. Although the literature addressing First Nation health is extensive, there remain some gaps in areas such as Aboriginal children's health and mental health. Perhaps the findings in this study can contribute to our knowledge in these areas.

Spiritual Health: Connectedness as a Determinant of Health

In a First Nation traditional worldview, spirituality is not separated from the mind or body and therefore, healing techniques, such as the reconciliation of traumatic events, may come from a spiritual process. Practices such as prayer and ceremony can be used to help people gain spiritual strength and coping. Dr. Paul Fredette (2002, p.9) in a presentation to the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) explains that traditional healers taught him that medicine refers to spiritual power and that the spirit is part of the whole person.

The connection between spirituality and health also has been discussed in the non-indigenous literature. Kliewer (2004) states:

> Research in the field indicates that spirituality and religion are seen as a core aspect of life, and patients want physicians to address issues of spirituality in the context of medical care. A public survey done in 1996 by USA Weekend showed that 63% of patients believe doctors should ask about spirituality issues, but only 10% have actually been asked. In another study, 77% of patients surveyed said physicians should consider patients' spiritual needs, and 37% wanted physicians to discuss religious beliefs with them more frequently (p.616).

Pesut (2003) describes how connectedness is one of the key themes in the literature on spirituality and that "intrapersonal and interpersonal" connectedness needs to be explored further (p.290-294). In other words, the true benefit of connectedness is its existence within one's self and with others. Connectedness has been described as a spiritual process that enhances our sense of self. Burkhardt and Nagai (2002) describe connectedness with our lineage as a "sacred journey" (p.283).

By framing connectedness as related to spiritual health, it also can be considered as a determinant of health. The literature on determinants of health suggests that health is influenced by factors of environment, genetic and social conditions, such as coping skills (Health Canada, 1998). More recently, Raphael (2002) has identified a list of eleven social determinants of health that include early life and social exclusion. In particular, these determinants appear to fit with the analysis of connectedness and health. Connectedness can be viewed as the opposite of exclusion and therefore, may encourage wellness, both at a social and spiritual level.

Some of the research on spirituality and connectedness referred to earlier implies that when we are disconnected from self or others, we may have impaired spiritual health. Coincidentally, the impact of adoption on First Nation communities also has been

described in the literature as a *wound*. For example, Fournier and Crey (1998) quote the words of an Elder who asks if these children will ever come home "to families who died of a broken heart" (p.93).

Since the literature on First Nation health emphasizes the need to examine these issues from a holistic framework, it seems logical that connectedness plays a key role in health. In the area of First Nation adoption, disconnection can happen in a number of ways. This disconnection will be examined later in the analysis of findings with implications for the enhancement of health information for First Nation people.

Summary of Literature Review

In summary, the current themes and assumptions in the adoption literature call for further insight into how these impact First Nation adoptees. The literature on culture and identity offers some possible parallels, but it requires further exploration from a First Nation perspective. This cultural perspective could help to advance the literature on attachment and abandonment. Furthermore, current discussions on health and connectedness present some of the challenges that First Nation adoptees may face while searching for connectedness to identity, culture, family and community, and ultimately to their spiritual selves. These challenges include lack of knowledge or barriers to information related to their background, minimal resources to assist with their search, lack of support services to provide helpful coping strategies and an overall sense of displacement from the world around them.

The research on adoption is based broadly on various theoretical prèmises that are found in social work policy and practice. For the purposes of this study, some of the major themes in the literature on adoption were reviewed to provide an overview of how

the findings of this study can advance adoption literature from a human ecological framework.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The chapter introduces the application of the research methodology and method used in this study. The chapter begins with a description of the research methodology or "way of thinking about and studying social reality" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.3). In this study, qualitative research is the methodology that provided the framework to examine the social reality of First Nation adoption through the relational experience and dialogue with the researcher and First Nation adoptees. The method, Grounded Theory, is described later in the chapter.

This chapter also describes the use of indigenous scientific techniques such as working with Elders, a First Nation community advisory committee, and cultural protocols or processes to honor Aboriginal ways of knowing. Finally I examine how both Western and indigenous scientific methods can blend together in a process that is both challenging and complimentary for conducting research with First Nation people.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is particularly suited for interpreting a phenomenon in terms of meanings that people bring to that phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Rubin and Rubin (1995) state that a qualitative approach lends itself to emphasize the "importance of seeing meaning in context" (p.31). To understand the experience of First Nation adoptees in terms of connectedness and health, participants involved in this study were asked to reflect on meanings attached to the adoption experience. The strength of this type of qualitative approach is described as emancipatory social research (Lather, 1991) in which both the researcher and participants become changed. Olesen (1994) describes it as "giving voice to the voiceless" (p.169). One of the strengths of qualitative

research is the focus on how humans make sense of their surroundings and interpret phenomena to provide the context, and a complex and holistic picture of an event or situation (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 1990).

This study was designed to capture specifically this complex, holistic picture. Adoptees in this study have shared their personal experiences with connectedness and health as well as the meanings they attribute to their experiences. Furthermore, key informants, such as Elders, provided information about the context of the adoption experience, especially from an indigenous point of view, anchored in the specific cultural context of the First Nation community. Both the shared personal experiences and contextual data provide valuable insight about adoption and First Nation children.

The entire research process was reviewed by and received guidance from a First Nation Community Advisory Committee, which represents the five First Nations of the Yellowhead Tribal Council, comprised of Elders and staff from the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency's Open-Customary Adoption Program. Its role was to provide suggestions to me regarding the research process, including community protocols and political or cultural matters that informed this study. The Committee recommended potential adoptees and key informants for inclusion in this study and provided feedback on research questions. This feedback was considered carefully in developing the interview guide. The Committee also made recommendations regarding the dissemination of research results.

Throughout this study, the Community Advisory Committee provided important information about cultural boundaries which are identified as important in the literature (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Furthermore, the Committee expressed caution about how I

should present myself as a researcher to the interview participants, the adoptees. In other words, they encouraged me to be honest and 'speak from the heart' led by a clear mind (NAHO, 2003) This involved a process in which I provided my cultural credentials as to who I am in the community as a Métis woman and who my relatives are. It also required me to be very clear in describing the potential benefits to the First Nation community. It is with thanks to the Community Advisory Committee that I was able to develop a research protocol for the study and a cultural safety protocol for interviewing adoptees.

Overall Research Protocol

One of the main roles of the Community Advisory Committee was to work with me to develop a research protocol that would inspire respectful and authentic research with the five First Nations that I would be working with. I view this approach as an integral feature of this study; it is an approach that attempts to be inclusive of the values, traditions and teachings of the First Nation communities.

For the most part, social science research has been a contentious issue for indigenous people around the world (Duran and Duran, 1995; Frideres, 1998). Duran and Duran (1995) propose that social scientists have been distorting the understandings of tribal people since contact (p.26). Frideres (1998) argues that by producing mainstream historical interpretations and definitions, historians have helped to legitimize power by creating a negative image of Aboriginal people (1998, p.12).

Western science was constructed in a particular context and therefore, it too includes biases, like any other construct (Smith, 1999; Waldrergrave, 2000). Smith (1999) describes social science as largely a secular activity with no mention of spirituality as "another way of knowing" (p.64). This legacy of disrespect for indigenous

values and ways of knowing can be addressed in research by developing, in collaboration with communities, a protocol for the research process. According to Macaulay, Gibson, Freeman, Commanda, McCabe, Robbins, and Twohig (1999), community is "a group of people sharing a common interest – cultural, social, political, health and economic" (p.775). In this study, community is defined as the five First Nations of the Yellowhead Tribal Council. These five First Nations may hold different cultural beliefs and practices, but share a common interest in child and family services for their respective communities.

By developing a research protocol, ethical principles are clearly established, such as specific rules about conduct that demonstrate "respect for communities" (Weijer, Goldsand and Emanuel, 1999). A research protocol is an absolute non-negotiable process that must be followed when conducting research in First Nation communities (American Indian Law Centre, 1999; National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO), 2004). Furthermore, inclusive or empowering research is detailed for the people involved as it pertains to respect and the sacredness of relationship (Waldergrave, 2000). The National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) recently published an article that describes four critically important issues for researchers to consider when conducting studies with Aboriginal people: ownership, control, access and possession (2004, p.81).

For the present study, I worked with the Community Advisory Committee to determine principles for an overall research protocol for working with the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) and a specific community protocol for working with individual members of Enoch, Alexander, Alexis, Sunchild and O-Chiese First Nations. The following is a historical account of the process.

In December 2001, my graduate advisor and I met with the Board of Directors of the YTSA to explain the purpose of the study, to receive their feedback and request a letter of support from the Chair of Chiefs for the Yellowhead Tribal Council. In January 2002, I met with members of the Community Advisory Committee in Jasper, Alberta, to review the goals of this study and to discuss protocol principles. Following this meeting, I received direction from the Committee to attend to certain cultural processes, such as making offerings of tobacco and cloth. In Jasper, the Committee sat in a pipe ceremony to ask for blessings. As the co-investigator for the study, I then presented tobacco to Elder Bluestone Yellowface, an Elder from the O'Chiese First Nation, who had named the YTSA Open-Customary Adoption Program, *From the Heart*. The Committee had advised me to seek blessings and permission from Elder Bluestone to use the same name for this study. At this meeting I received some teachings, her prayer and her blessing to proceed with the study.

Once the University of Alberta requirements were met, granting me approval to proceed with the study, I met again with the Advisory Committee to identify potential participants, review interview questions, and schedule time for talking circles. The Committee provided a great deal of support, including identifying community resources, such as Elders, healers, and counselling services in the event that participants required debriefing sessions. Elder Bluestone and the Committee proposed that a ceremony should be held upon completion of my dissertation. This ceremony would be a welcoming and honour ceremony for adoptees who participated in the study.

Protocol for Participants

Further to the overall research protocol for working with the five First Nations of the Yellowhead Tribal Council, I felt it would be just as critical to develop a specific protocol for meeting with First Nation adoptees. This protocol was developed with cultural advice from Elder Bluestone and the Community Advisory Committee and is characteristic of research "based on respect rather than power" (Haig-Brown and Archibald, 1996, p. 259). This part of my research process demonstrated that western scientific research and indigenous research share some mutual principles in how participants are protected in research. The importance of community collaboration, cultural safety and respectful research has been discussed by both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal scholars and research institutes (Macaulay, Gibson, Freeman, Commanda, McCabe, Robbins & Twohig, 1999; National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2004). This is elaborated on in the following data collection section. What the Elders involved in this study suggested were the following interview practice principles:

- Be respectful of the participant's wishes regarding where and when to meet.
- Honour silence, tears and other emotions with patience and respect.
- Follow cultural cues in language, body and eye movements.
- Engage in sharing when appropriate and to be helpful.
- Answer all questions as best as possible.
- Avoid making judgement calls or assessing situations from a clinical perspective.
- Follow through with any commitments regarding follow-up.
- Present the participant with a gift for their time, story and contribution.

Participant Selection

Adoptees were selected for interviewing according to specific criteria as follows.

Inclusion Criteria

Defining inclusion criteria is an important procedure in any research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Morse, 1994; Patton, 1990). Participants are selected based on the principle of *purposeful sampling*, based on their suitability to participate in interviews that will be *information rich* (Patton, 1990). Morse (1994) proposes that "a good informant is one who has the knowledge and experience the researcher requires, has the ability to reflect, is articulate, has the time to be interviewed, and is willing to participate in the study" (p.228). One of the priorities for this study was to include adoptees who initially were unsure of their identity, birth family and community and who later gained this information through some form of reunion. This type of experience enhanced discussions about the factors of connectedness and health. More specifically, adoptees selected for this study were required to meet the following criteria:

- A participant must be a member of one of the five Nations of the Yellowhead Tribal Council or referred through the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program.
- A participant must be willing to participate in the study.
- A participant must be eighteen or over.
- A participant must be English speaking.
- A participant must have been adopted outside of his/her birth family.
- A participant must have had contact with his/her birth family or community.
- A participant must be willing to be tape-recorded.

One *exclusion* criterion, the inability to speak or read in the English language, was identified because of restricted resources, including time-frame and budgetary considerations. The adoptees included in this study were initially referred to me by the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) in Alberta and the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The Director of the YTSA made first contact by telephone with each of the participants that the YTSA referred. If they were interested in being interviewed, an Information Sheet (Appendix A) was sent to them for further information. I then attempted to contact individuals by phone to answer any of their outstanding questions before trying to schedule an interview. I worked with the YTSA for almost three months to contact adoptees. It was a difficult process since the adoptees, who were selected according to the criteria outlined above, were either hard to contact or, after contact had been established, were unwilling or unable to participate. I had contact with six individuals referred by YTSA and interviewed two of them.

Once this process was exhausted with the YTSA, I made contact with the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program, requesting their assistance. This agency has been instrumental in advocating for First Nation adoptees in Canada and in assisting adoptees to repatriate back to their home communities. Since I had some contact with them in my previous social work practice, they appeared to be a logical choice as an agency that could assist in locating First Nation adoptees who may be interested in participating in this study. The Director and staff were keenly interested in this study and provided a letter of support. With letter in hand, I received consent from my PhD

Committee and the University of Alberta's Ethics Review Committee for Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics to proceed.

Data Collection

In this study, the methods utilized for data collection were interviews and talking circles with specific cultural considerations given to both of these approaches.

Interviews

Qualitative interviewing is "a conversation which requires intense listening, a respect for and curiosity about what people say, and a systematic effort to really hear and understand what people tell you" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p.17). There are several types of interviewing, but the one selected for this study is informal semi-structured interviewing, facilitated by the use of an interview guide to help interviewees focus on specific topic areas. The interview questions were pre-tested by the Community Advisory Committee members who had similar characteristics and experiences to participants prior to the interviews, and changes were made accordingly. The Committee also had the opportunity to suggest questions for inclusion in the interview guide as described later in this chapter.

Qualitative interviewing has been described as the favourite methodological tool of the qualitative researcher, which guides a conversation through the art of asking questions and listening that produces a substantial amount of information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). For this study, in-depth interviews were held with 18 adoptees. Further information about the process for selection and the process utilized to generate data will be discussed further in this chapter.

Talking Circles

Talking circles were used to gather information from key informants. Key informants included Elders, staff, adoptive parents and board members for the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency Open Customary Adoption Program. This information, in turn, enhanced the adoptee interviews. The use of talking circles, as an indigenous method of knowledge building, replaced the conventional use of western focus groups. Stevensen (1999) explains that the circle, which is a form that holds much significance for Aboriginal people, is "a sacred symbol of the interdependence of all forms of life; the circle is a key symbol in Native spirituality, family structure, gatherings of people, meetings, songs, and dances" (p.5).

Researcher's Memo Writing

Memo writing is a function of research that captures a researcher's inner thoughts, questions and insights that arise during the research process and analysis. Memo writing also allows a researcher to discern the difference between what is being said and his/ her own thoughts about the process. The researcher dissects the data from a variety of perspectives and defines what is implicit and explicit. It also helps the researcher to conceptualise these thoughts, which can transcend existing theory as the researcher develops his/her own theory (Charmaz, 1990). I used a memo book in which I reflected on my perceptions during and after interviews and talking circles. By examining my perceptions later, such as through data analysis, I was able to identify and clarify assumptions. For example, I wrote down when someone's painful memories brought her or him to tears. This presented challenges for me from time to time and I am grateful for the 'tools of my trade' so to speak from my background in social work. One vivid

example is when a participant began to describe an experience with sexual abuse and I really wanted to encourage the person to get some counselling or develop some plan with them to address this. I used memo notes to record my reaction and my behaviour. Once the interview was over I could go back to these notes and validate my feelings and actions for maintaining an empathetic and professional stance in that situation. I could use memo notes to remind me of the context or issues that brought on such emotion and consider this objectively during the analysis rather than responding personally and forgetting the research context.

Memo writing also can include diagrams that work in conjunction with memos to enrich the data collection process. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), diagrams help to add density and integrate the final product. However, it is important to emphasize the significance of these memos as public documents because "although memos and diagrams themselves rarely are seen by anyone but the analyst (and perhaps committee members), they remain important documents because they record progress, thoughts, feelings, and directions of the research and researcher – in fact, the entire gestalt of the research process" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.218). There were times when I used diagrams such as family maps to assist me later in making the connections I needed about family information and events. These diagrams assisted me to compile the tables, presented in later chapters that describe the adoptees and their families.

In this study, I also *bracketed* my personal experiences with adoption. Bracketing is a process by which a phenomenon is studied and defined without interference of preconceptions by "an informed reader" (Patton, 1990, p. 408). This process was facilitated by my extensive training and work in the field of child welfare, my

involvement in the production of a film, and the writing of my own story in a book on women's stories. For example, in my training as a social worker, I was able to learn how to be an objective and empathetic witness to the pain of others. The generalist social worker uses engagement, assessment and planning to get the work done while being helpful and supportive. Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois (2004) describe the importance of empowering communication in social work practice which demonstrates acceptance while being accountable. Accountable social workers "act with professional integrity and impartiality, and they utilize sound protocols in practice and research" (p.57).

Researcher's Portfolio Use

Social work educators also advocate for the use of *portfolio* as an integrative tool. In this study, I used the portfolio process to assist in deconstructing and separating my own experiences with adoption from the experiences of those I interviewed. A portfolio is an integrative tool that has been used in education circles for some time (Brown, 2002; Coleman, Rogers & King, 2002; Zubezarreta, 2004). It also has been used for professional development, such as in administrative environments and business circles. By definition, a portfolio implies a collection of work that demonstrates some sort of competence by integrating knowledge or skills within a required format. Zubezarreta (2004) states that portfolio work helps a student to "show deep analysis of evidence and learning that stems from deep reflection" (p.xi). Furthermore, she states that "more enriched learning is likely to occur if the student is encouraged to come to terms self-consciously over the duration of an academic endeavour – for example, a semester course, the culmination of an honours program, the achievement of general education

goals, or the completion of a degree – with essential questions about learning itself" (2004, p. 4).

Coleman, Rogers and King (2002) describe social work portfolios as deliberate and focused and "are linked to critical thinking in such a way that the portfolio is a product and critical thinking is the vehicle through which the product is constructed" (p.585). This application has been used in the University of Calgary's Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program in the Access Division as a half course equivalency. Students in this program are expected to develop a portfolio throughout the semester to demonstrate their integration of knowledge of a theme course and to explore and integrate their personal and professional experiences in relation to the course. Students are granted flexibility in the development of the portfolio and are encouraged to use a creative process, such as art, music, photography or writing to capture personal phenomena in a given environment (Carriere, Bastien, Pelech, Zapf, Zuk and Bodor, 2002).

In the field of education, the development of a portfolio involves two steps (Guaglianone and Yerkes, 1998). The first step is to create a collection of artefacts. The second step is to reflect on the materials and make personal adjustments. Brown (2002) relates the use of portfolio to theories of learning in which a portfolio can be used to assess the transformational aspect of learning (p. 230). He observes that the value of portfolio work is that it is a method to develop "a greater appreciation of the role of reflection" (p. 234).

In this study, the portfolio was used to capture and integrate a personal process for me, as the researcher, since I share the experience of adoption with the participants. It is important to identify how my personal experiences came to co-exist within the research

process without being transferred from one to the other. My portfolio was a scrapbook of photographs and documents related to my life that helped to demonstrate my individual and unique experiences as part of the collective experience of adoption. However, the most valuable aspect of the portfolio was its ability to help me, as the researcher, reduce my biases and assumptions about adoption through a realistic examination of my own experiences that include a validation of my personal growth and healing. How this reduced bias is by validating my own experiences and placing them into perspective, I developed a greater sense of the gifts and some of the challenges presented to me through adoption.

Participant Journal Writing

Participants were encouraged to take notes about the research process. This process is sometimes used in social work practice to assist clients in the assessment of their thoughts and behaviours. The applicability of journals is that "they can be used in preference to other data collection techniques when detailed personal experiences are required from subjects" (Marlow, 2001, p.170). However, for the purposes of this study, participants were encouraged to use journaling as a form of self-debriefing to record their reactions, which may have surfaced after the interviews. Journals remained the property of the participants. At the end of the data collection process, participants were asked if they wished to share thoughts from their journals that would be captured as *other comments* for the purpose of analysis. Some of the participants shared poems, other pieces of their writing, or newspaper articles about themselves. This process of sharing was entirely voluntary since the purpose of the journal was to be a personal tool for the participants and not a primary method of data collection.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to conditions designed to ensure that the theory produced by the researcher is dependable. Guba (1990) identifies four aspects of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Furthermore, Crabtree and Miller (2000) describe trustworthiness as a process by which several checks and balances occur to ensure that the presentation of the findings is an accurate description of what has occurred. This process includes *recycling* the analysis back to adoptees and key informants, using triangulation and searching for bias (p.86). Therefore, trustworthiness is the extent to which the results achieved from the research are accurately derived from an appropriate inquiry process. Trustworthiness is the foundation on which accurate theory can be presented.

In this study, trustworthiness was based on the inclusion criteria that ensured that participants have the background and experience to speak on the issue. I met with participants to verify the information, and my own personal bias was checked through memo writing, a portfolio and the guidance of the Community Advisory Committee. By meeting standards of trustworthiness, a foundation of trust was developed.

Credibility

Credibility, as an aspect of trustworthiness, refers to the *truth* or *believability* of research findings (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Morse, 1994). The goal of achieving credibility is to "demonstrate that the inquiry was conducted in such a manner as to ensure that the subject was accurately identified and described" (Marshall and Rossman, 1995, p.143). Credibility can be achieved in a number of ways.

According to Creswell (1998), researchers should spend time with participants in order to overcome distortions introduced by the researcher's presence and to provide time to identify characteristics of both the context and the phenomenon. For this study, I took as much time as was needed to develop a meaningful relationship with the participants. I spoke to them on the phone or communicated via email prior to our interview and addressed any concerns which were raised during this communication. The time this took for each participant varied but it was at least a couple of hours for each person or more depending on the nature of their questions or comfort level.

Furthermore, adoptees were given the opportunity after the interview to review and revise the interview transcripts to ensure that the information was accurate, to clarify content and to expand on incomplete material (Morse, 1991). I was able to send transcripts to all but one person who had moved and I could not locate her. I received feedback from three of the participants who wanted to clarify some sections of transcripts. While I may have edited some elements of the information such as grammatical changes for the production of theory, adoptees generally could recognize their story. This test meets Strauss and Corbin's (1998) assessment that "in the larger sense, participants should be able to recognize themselves in the story being told" (p. 159).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest that a qualitative researcher should undertake three steps to ensure the credibility of the research report. First, the report can demonstrate credibility through its *transparency*. In other words, a reader should be able to understand clearly the researcher's basic steps of data collection, ranging from a discussion of the data collection and maintenance process to an explanation of the

researcher's intellectual strengths and weaknesses, biases and conscientiousness. Second, a credible report is one in which the researcher has attended to ideas that were found to be inconsistent. In other words, a credible report demonstrates *consistency*, which is achieved with a thorough examination of themes for coherence. However, this does not mean that a researcher merely can eliminate inconsistencies. Instead, a researcher should be able to explain these inconsistencies. Finally, a research report demonstrates its credibility through its *communicability*. The report should be written in such a way that the reader understands the "richness of detail, abundance of evidence, and vividness of text" so that even for those who have never been in the field, the material is real (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 91).

Credibility can be further enhanced by using the constant comparison method, which helps a researcher become intimately familiar with the data. Peer reviews or debriefings with other people who can provide an objective point of view on transcripts is also useful for achieving credibility. In particular, Van Dongen (1990) reports that peer review and member checks can be used to enhance the credibility of the researcher as an instrument for data collection. However, these types of activities must be undertaken with serious and careful consideration to a participant's privacy and confidentiality. A researcher must consider the essential elements of confidentiality prior to sharing the data with anyone not involved in the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Patton (1990) stressed that the rapport between the researcher and participants is an important contribution to the credibility of a research study. Rew, Bechtel and Sapp (1999), building on Patton's work, observe, "when the researcher's presentation of self is believed by the research participants, the trust and rapport essential to credibility of the

research team is established" (p. 84). A researcher's credibility also can be used to increase overall credibility by demonstrating "the researcher's familiarity with the overall field" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 263).

In this study, I believe my credibility stemmed from my own personal and professional experiences with the issue of adoption and was enhanced by a previous working relationship with the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency, blessings from Elder Bluestone Yellowface, and consultations with the Community Advisory Committee. A comfortable relationship was developed with participants prior to conducting the interviews and engaging in talking circles.

Also, a culturally appropriate form of inquiry, such as the talking circle, was used to encourage key informants to speak more freely. For centuries, indigenous people have used the healing or talking circle as a way of dealing with personal and emotional matters. Leclair, Nicholson and Hartley (2003) discuss how a circle was used to bring Aboriginal women together and engage in healing work and to "collect and capture our stories" (p.63). These circles were used "to bring understanding between tribal peoples in times of decision-making, conflict resolution or healing" (Graveline, 1998, p.131). Circles begin with an opening prayer led by an Elder. Usually, the person speaking holds a rock or a sacred object, which is passed on to the next person when the speaker is finished. Confidentiality is maintained as a sign of respect for the ceremonial characteristic of a talking circle (Nechi Institute for Training and Health Research, 1999). Martin (2001) stresses that "compared to other research methods, talking circles place a larger degree of responsibility on the listener. Participants have more time to reflect on what has been said by each participant and are given ample opportunity to formulate their

own thoughts prior to speaking" (p.54). The constant comparison method of analysis with open, axial and selective coding was used to identify themes and categories from both talking circles.

Transferability

Transferability deals with the generalizability of findings to a wider population. Theoretical (purposive) sampling is used to maximize the range of information that is collected. The participants are initially selected according to their experience, willingness to share, and ability to inform or illuminate the phenomenon. In this study inclusion criteria were developed to ensure the selection of participants was relevant to the goals of the study. The initial participants were selected by referral from YTSA and later, the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Society, which added typical and atypical dimensions to the results. By having participants from various parts of Canada, the result was what Creswell (1998) describes as a "thick description" that provides enough information about the context to impart the experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Thick description also facilitates judgments about the extent to which working hypotheses generated from that context might be transferable to a second and similar context. In this study, the results can be transferred to another context such as transracial adoption or studies focused on adoption and other Aboriginal groups, such as Métis and Inuit peoples. Most of the study participants were placed in a transracial family and so the discussion on identity and lost identity could be explored from the perspective of other races or other Aboriginal adoptees. While Morse (1991) contends that a qualitative research project should stand on its own as a complete study, the development of a

substantive theory is regarded as a foundation for future research. In this study, a theory on First Nation adoption was developed as an outcome of the research.

Dependability

Rather than reliability, qualitative researchers seek dependability: that the data will be accurate and comprehensive (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1998). The qualitative researcher must document and defend all design decisions so that the reader has access to that information when judging the study and when contemplating a comparable investigation (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). Testing rival explanations or hypotheses by organizing the data in different ways and then analyzing the data from alternative perspectives demonstrates why the methods that were selected are most appropriate for the particular study (Patton, 1990). In this study, the design included in-depth interviewing with eighteen participants and two talking circles with thirteen key informants. I provided an explanation for the use of how qualitative research, in particular indepth interviewing and talking circles, were culturally relevant and appropriate with participants. I engaged in an indigenous scientific methodology that provided an alternative to western qualitative research and used tools such as the portfolio to add another dimension to the study which, according to Rice and Ezzy (1999), suggests that each researcher's framework of understanding will still reflect their unique "geographical location, disciplinary training and biographical history" (p.37).

Confirmability

The grounded theory researcher looks to confirmability rather than objectivity in establishing that the findings are a function solely of respondents and of the phenomenon in question. The research must be as free as possible from the biases, motivations, and

perspectives of the researcher. Both dependability and confirmability are established through an auditing of the research process. An audit will verify that each finding can be appropriately traced back through the analysis steps to the original data. The use of verbatim transcripts of interviews provides evidence of the original source and allows other researchers to inspect and assess the author's interpretations of the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Rice and Ezzy, 1999). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that the report of a study should be auditable by another person who can follow the "decision trail" through clear information about the progression of events and about the logic of what was done and why. In this study, an audit trail was established through the conservation and protection of original transcripts, letters of introduction, information sheets and consent forms. Memo notes and the use of portfolio were used to assist me to deconstruct or bracket any personal biases.

Triangulation

Triangulation, as a technique for verifying research results, is achieved when researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigations and theories to present a single point (Creswell, 1998; Kimchi, Poliyka, & Stevensen, 1991; Marshall and Rossman, 1995). In this study, two methods were used for data collection: interviews and talking circles. Interview participants, the adoptees, were provided with the opportunity to check and revise transcripts. As well, the data were supplemented by memo writing and journal entries, the use of a portfolio and an extensive literature review supported the research. All of these methods compliment one another and act collaboratively to strengthen the research results.

Cultural Considerations

Several cultural practices were observed for receiving permission and spiritual grounding for this study. As explained earlier, I received a vision of this work at the onset of my PhD program through an experience in a sweatlodge. This experience was influential in ensuring that the cultural process was honoured and that the blessings of the Elders were received as crucial elements of this work, which has been a profound spiritual experience for me. These elements are part of the foundation or epistemology of indigenous thought and knowledge, demonstrating the recognition that spiritual forces, described as *energy*, guide our daily lives. This energy influences the environment in which we live and interact with other living beings. Indigenous science also informs us that we are not separate from our ancestors and that we can connect with them through dreams, prayers, ceremony and prayer. For this study, I felt it was essential to engage in a process that honoured these ways of knowing and being since I felt that the ancestors have played a critical role in which I am and ultimately, in how this work was conducted.

The data gathering process for this study has been impacted significantly by this indigenous paradigm. Sinclair (2004) stresses, "from an indigenous worldview the offering of tobacco and engaging in ceremony and prayer is actually the beginning of a research project" (p.124). Not all indigenous people use tobacco in their spiritual work. However, the importance of spiritual processes appears to be a common approach to healing work. Cajete (2000) states that indigenous people believe that the real test of living is to establish harmonious relationships with nature and this is the "source of one's essential spiritual being" (p.179). For this study, I received strength, wisdom and vision

through reflection, prayer and ceremony, and thereby, was able to create a positive energy for the participants in the study. And, at the beginning of this process, one of the first opportunities for me to honour this way of being was with Elder Bluestone Yellowface.

Elder Bluestone is Saulteaux and is from the O'Chiese First Nation in central Alberta. While her age is unknown to me, what I have recognized and experienced is her wisdom, knowledge and kindness. She has been instrumental in the development of all Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency programs since the first priority in her work is children. Elder Bluestone has raised many children through customary adoption in her own tribal customs as well as through the Alberta child welfare system. At the beginning of the study, Elder Bluestone advised several of us that long ago children who had no parents were called *Aski-awass* or *children of the earth* because it was thought that Mother Earth would look after them. Her words are exceptionally inspirational, affirming that spiritual forces or *energy* guide our daily lives. If we believe that the earth is our relative and that we have a mutual responsibility to each other, to the earth and to ourselves, we have a different view of processes, such as child-rearing and caregiving. In other words, these responsibilities are not sanctioned or administered through court work and the intrusion of foreign law. They are a natural part of life or living in balance with natural laws that encourage us to walk in balance with the universe and care for each other as a natural part of life.

It has taken me some time to understand some of these concepts since I am one of those children of the earth who, thankfully, was looked after by loving adoptive parents. As my life has evolved, I have come to appreciate the ancestral knowledge that is part of

my make-up and that reminds me that in my work and other areas of my life these beliefs and processes must be respected. For this reason, sitting in ceremony throughout this study was essential.

The beginning of this study was marked by a ceremony in which I sat with Elder Bluestone and asked for her blessings for this journey. Since Elder Bluestone offers her prayers in her own language, I had asked a colleague who can speak her language to interpret for me during this first meeting. I was advised to bring an offering of tobacco and to be specific with a request for prayers. As such, I asked Elder Bluestone about the research and whether the study should be conducted. After Elder Bluestone prayed to help me connect with the energy required to answer these questions, she told me some stories. In these stories, she described different situations that involved children who she knew in the community. These children sometimes needed a home, and Elder Bluestone offered them a home without any financial compensation. Many times, she also helped their families to become stronger and to be together again.

At the end of the ceremony, Elder Bluestone gave me an answer to one of my most important questions – *What right do I have to conduct this study?* Plainly translated, she said, "You will do good work because you are one of them." That was all I needed to hear that day – an assurance or validation, translated through the kind words of Elder Bluestone, that in concert with Western scientific requirements of ensuring validity, trustworthiness and credibility, I was working in "a good way" according to the ancient codes of conduct of my ancestors.

Interview Guide

Following Rubin and Rubin's recommendation for selecting a topic of conversation or categories of questions, an interview guide for adoptees who agreed to be interviewed was developed for this study (Table 3.1). It was designed to assist me, the interviewer, in asking the right sequence and cluster of questions. Moreover, the guide allowed the study to honour the use of storytelling while also serving as a gentle reminder to adoptees to stay focused on the story.

Table 3.1

Interview Guide for Adoptee Interviews

Category	Questions
Category 1 Background Information	1. How old were you when you were adopted? 2. What do you remember about this? 3. Where did you grow up? 4. Tell me about your adoptive family/siblings. 5. How did you find out you were adopted? 6. How old were you when you were told?
Category 2 Connection to Adoptive Family/Identity	1. What was it like growing up in this family and community? 2. Did you feel part of this family and community? 3. How did you feel about being adopted in this family? 4. What was your relationship with your family and community?
Category 3 Health Questions	1. Can you tell me about behaviours or things you did which you think are related to your adoption? 2. How did you cope with thoughts and feelings about adoption? 3. Did you suffer from any illnesses or other conditions over the years? 4. How would you describe your health generally?
Category 4 Connectedness/Kinship	1. Why did you begin the process of searching for your birth family? 2. When did you begin your search for your birth family and community? Please describe this process. 3. What was the reunion like? How do you feel about it?

	4. How did your birth family respond? 5. What was the attitude of your adoptive family at this time? *6. What could have been different for you?* *7. What was done right?*
Conclusion	1. What recommendations do you have for adoption programs for First Nation children?

Interview Guide for Adoptee Interviews

Note. Italicized questions are questions that were added by the Community Advisory Committee.

The interview guide was developed within a Human Ecological and Indigenous Scientific framework in order to elicit information about the environmental context for adoptees, particularly as they were growing up, their adoption and reunion experiences, their health issues and the role of connectedness in their lives. Interviews were recorded on tape for later analysis, and I kept memo notes in a journal after each interview to describe body language and other contextual information that could provide further insight during data analysis.

Semi structured interviewing can be used for what Rubin and Rubin (1995) refer to as *cultural interviewing* (p. 175). For semi-structured interviewing, questions must match the objectives of the study, but "the scope of the questioning can shrink or expand as you learn from the interviews and what concepts, values, beliefs, or norms you need to comprehend" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 175). For cultural interviewing, Rubin and Rubin recommend that researchers specifically ask *main* questions and subsequent *probing* and *follow-up* questions. According to Rubin and Rubin, this approach is the key to effective qualitative interviews. Main questions are conversational devices that help a researcher and participant get started. Probing questions help to explore a topic further.

This technique works well with the constant comparison method of analysis where the data are reviewed continuously for emerging themes, for example, understanding the role of connectedness in the health of First Nation adoptees

The Interview Process

At the beginning of the initial interview or conversation, I gave each interviewee an information sheet (Appendix A), and I explained the contents of the consent form (Appendix B) and the confidentiality policy that guide the study. In particular, I explained that during the interview, if at any time the interviewee did not want something she or he said to be included in the transcript, this preference would be respected. Interviewees also were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time. As well, they were informed that all of the interviews would be transcribed, however I would be the only person who would have access to their actual names. I also reviewed the consent form, and I asked the interviewee if she or he had any questions regarding the consent form prior to signing. Both I, as the researcher, and the interviewee, signed the consent form. I then provided the interviewee with an overview of the interview guide and explained that in addition to the interview guide, other questions may be asked if clarification of a response was needed.

At this time, I also shared some aspect of my personal story and why this study is important to me as an Aboriginal adoptee. I found this approach to be critical in building an alliance with the participant. This approach follows Bishop's (2002) advice in *Becoming an Ally*. Bishop maintains that it is imperative for practitioners to understand oppression through understanding the social, personal and political underpinnings of society and emphasizes that the power of personal liberation from oppression is to assist

in the liberation of others. In particular, Bishop writes "those who are involved in their own process of liberation" are allies for others who are oppressed (2002, p. 112).

Once rapport had been established, I described how the interview would proceed, explaining that it would likely last at least an hour and that the interviewee could stop at any time for a rest. I also explained how the tape recorder worked and how transcripts would be handled. The process of memo writing was also reviewed so that the adoptee understood why note taking accompanied the audiotaping. I also explained to the interviewees that they may wish to consider using a journal or writing some of their thoughts down as a response to the interview if they found it helpful to remember events or to debrief with someone later. I explained to them that their notes or writings were strictly for their own use unless they wished to share them with me.

All the interviews were audiotaped, and interviewees were informed that I would be taking notes to facilitate the analysis of the data at a later time. While interviewees were advised that they could be contacted for additional interviewing if further clarification was required, all the adoptees were interviewed once only. The two interviewees who reside in British Columbia were interviewed by phone, and I traveled to Manitoba and Ontario to interview the adoptees who reside in those two provinces.

The data were collected between April 2003 and August 2003. Those adoptees who were interviewed in person were given a choice of location to be interviewed, but I did suggest that it should be a place where they felt most comfortable and where they felt they could speak freely. Of the 16 adoptees who were interviewed in person, five were interviewed in their homes, two in restaurants of their choice, two were interviewed at a Friendship Center, and two were interviewed at their offices. Three were interviewed at

the home of a contact person, who facilitated the interviews in Ontario. The remaining two adoptees were interviewed at the offices of the Southern Manitoba First Nations Repatriation Program. Each adoptee was asked to choose an interview time that was convenient for her or him. Three interviews lasted one hour, and the rest were two to three hours long. After the tapes from the first interviews were transcribed, second or follow-up interviews were deemed unnecessary as they had answered each question in depth and there did not appear to be any gaps or unclear information. I sent each adoptee a copy of the transcript from his/her interview so that he/she could review and clarify the discussion if necessary. Of the total 18 interviewees, two could not be located because they had moved and there was little information on their whereabouts. Two participants received their transcripts in person, and ten received them electronically. Three sets of transcripts were mailed to participants directly. One transcript was sent to the participant, care of his/her liaison worker at the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program. Based on this distribution and review of the transcripts, three interviewees responded with changes and the transcripts were revised accordingly. This included clarification on wording in Obji-Cree, correcting the names of communities and re-organizing the sequence of events.

The interview guide was designed purposely to begin the interview with important demographic information, such as age at the time of adoption, followed by open-ended questions, asking interviewees to describe their adoptive family and their early experiences with them. This technique of questioning facilitated story-telling for the adoptees and minimized the necessity for me to interject. However, there were some occasions when questions needed to be clarified or when some additional questions were

asked to supplement the information provided. I attempted to keep my own experiences in check with notes and short verbal affirmations. For example, if an adoptee asked me if I had experienced a similar event or emotion, I attempted to keep these answers brief. Rosenthal (2003) suggests that in using narrative questioning "the social researcher is not called to reflect on what his or her conversations can bring about and to thereby also see to it that the conversations he or she is guiding are supportive rather than burdensome for the interviewees"(p.915). In other words, the manner in which we ask questions is as important as the questions themselves.

At the end of each interview, I thanked the interviewee and reviewed the follow-up process. I collected a mailing address or identified an alternate means of sending a transcript. Also, all adoptees who were interviewed in person were given a gift of a book and a compact disc (CD). Those individuals who were interviewed by phone were provided with these items by mail. The book is a collection of stories that includes my personal story with adoption. The CD is a collection of songs written and recorded by my sister who also grew up in care of a government agency. The importance of these gifts is explained by Sinclair (2004): "Gifts are highly significant to indigenous culture and symbolize the philosophy of interconnectedness through generosity and sharing of material wealth" (p. 124).

After all the interviews were concluded, I listened to each tape to review the information and to refresh my notes. A professional transcriber transcribed the tapes in a format normally acceptable for university research. The transcriber and I signed a letter of agreement addressing confidentiality matters. I then reviewed the transcripts while listening to the tapes to fill in any blanks or gaps that the transcriber could not

understand. Once I had the final version of the transcripts, they were sent to the interviewees for their review and revision if necessary. Interviewees were asked to send back revised transcripts within a month after receiving them and also were advised that if I did not receive the transcripts within a month, I would take this as notice that the transcript was acceptable. As stated earlier, three transcripts were revised accordingly.

Talking Circles

For this study, the insight gathered during the talking circles supplemented the data in terms of breadth and perspective gathered during the interviews from the 18 adoptees. The process of talking circles requires much more listening than talking (Graveline, 1998; Martin, 2001). Further, a researcher or facilitator must maintain a stance of respect and must be willing to work with an Elder to ensure that proper protocol is observed. For instance, I was advised that it is appropriate to begin a talking circle with an Elder's prayers before describing the intent of the study. As well, food and beverages were provided to circle participants as a form of proper social protocol to demonstrate respect and to express gratitude. The talking circles were held in two communities to respect the geographical tribal areas of the Yellowhead Tribal Council and to follow the YTSA's protocols or customs for arranging meetings. The YTSA attempts to have communities meetings that are accessible to their First Nation member communities by rotating meetings from the north area to south or central areas.

The Elders and YTSA staff were familiar and comfortable with the use of the audiotape since they often used a video camera during their meetings for training purposes. Elders with YTSA have worked with various communities for some time and are accustomed to being asked to work in different settings. Ellerby (2001) observes that most cultural advisors and Elders affirm that different Elders are called up to serve the world in different ways and that all types of work are necessary.

It was intended that circle participation would include adoptive parents in the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA). Open-Customary Adoption Program and

adoption specialists, participants in the first talking circle, were YTSA child welfare services staff, Elders of the Advisory Committee for the YTSA Open-Customary Adoption Program, and Board Members of this program. Some of the circle members had multiple roles such as being adoptive parents as well as being an Elder or staff person. This created a rich and diverse circle process. I determined that a maximum of 12 circle members would be selected and invited to attend each talking circle. The circle members or key informants were provided with a Key Informant Information Sheet (Appendix C) that explained the purpose of the study and a Key Informant Consent Form (Appendix D) that confirmed their understanding of the study and provided them with the opportunity to grant permission for audiotaping the talking circle. Circle members who participated in the second talking circle also received a preliminary summary of the study results. Both talking circles began and ended with a prayer from one of the participating Elders.

Unlike traditional talking circles, the two talking circles in this study were audiotaped and influenced by an interview guide (Table 3.2) to help focus the discussion. I decided that it would be appropriate to outline the questions that needed to be considered by the circle participants as this process has been used in other academic research (Martin, 2001). The setting for each circle was in one of the local offices in two First Nation communities, the O'Chiese First Nation and the Enoch Cree Nation in Alberta. A further description of each circle is included, followed by the Question Guide used in each circle.

Talking Circle One

The first talking circle was held at the O'Chiese First Nation in central Alberta, which lies at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Circle members were invited to the

talking circle by a letter that I had drafted and that was signed by the Executive Director of the YTSA. The letter was followed up by a phone call conducted by one of the YTSA staff to ensure that travel and accommodations were in place. An offering of tobacco was made to each of the Elders involved.

Of the 12 key informants who were invited to attend the first talking circle, 10 were able to participate despite the terrible weather conditions that day. The circle included three Elders who advise the YTSA Open-Customary Adoption Program, six YTSA staff members, and the YTSA Executive Director. The Elder from O'Chiese, Elder Bluestone Yellowface, opened the circle with a prayer. Following the opening prayer, I distributed and explained the consent forms and ensured that all circle members signed the forms. For the Elders whose first language is not English, other circle members translated the information.

Over the duration of the circle, which was approximately three hours, each of the circle members was provided with several rounds of opportunity to speak and to present information. I used the *key informant interview guide* to encourage discussion on a range of questions, including a question about key informants' thoughts on the type of questions that adoptees in this study should be asked (Table 3.2). In the traditional use of talking circles, each key informant took turns speaking.

As the circle concluded, I asked for suggestions about where the next talking circle would be held. Through consensus, it was agreed that the next talking circle would be held at one of the First Nation communities closer to Edmonton, the Enoch Cree Nation. Since the second talking circle would include a presentation of preliminary

findings, it was expected that I would contact the YTSA Executive Director to make arrangements for the presentation.

Talking Circle Two

The second talking circle was held at the Enoch Cree Nation west of Edmonton after the participant interviews were concluded and also included 11 participants. While the same circle members were invited to attend the second circle, there was some difference in participation. One Elder could not attend due to health reasons and the Executive Director for YTSA invited another Elder to join us. This Elder was from the Enoch Cree Nation and served on the Elders Advisory Committee for the YTSA Open-Customary Adoption. Three of the YTSA staff were from different Band programs than those who attended the first circle. Since the second circle was closer to Edmonton, additional staff chose to attend as they were interested in the research and working for the YTSA Open Customary program. This included staff from the Enoch Child and Family Service office and two YTSA staff from the main office in Edmonton. I was not distracted by these changes as I felt it was meeting the purpose of the circle and it was in keeping with a traditional circle process which encourages participation by anyone who is suppose to be there, in a spiritual sense (Martin, 2001).

Similar to the first circle, the second circle was opened and closed with a prayer by Elder Bluestone Yellowface. Following the opening prayer, I distributed and explained the consent forms, which were signed by all in attendance. The interview guide was passed around the room, and I encouraged everyone to speak in circle fashion. I began by reviewing the preliminary research results (Appendix E). After the preliminary results were reviewed, the circle was open for discussion. As key informants began to

make comments about the preliminary results, they also were asked to consider the questions from the interview guide while they were taking their turn to speak. During this second circle, key informants raised important considerations about the dissemination of the research results.

Table 3.2: ***Talking Circle Interview Guide*****:** ***Talking Circle Interview Guide***

Session	Questions
Circle One	1. Can you share some of your experiences in the adoption of First Nation children? 2. What have been some of the challenges or difficulties in this area? 3. What have been some of the rewards or good things you have experienced? 4. What does connectedness mean in the adoption of First Nation children? 5. What have you seen as some of the health challenges in adopted children? 6. What sort of questions should we be asking the adoptees in this study?
Circle Two	1. Is there something you want to add from our first talking circle? 2. Are you comfortable with the results of this study? 3. How can this information be used and who should get it? 4. What other recommendations do you have for the YTSA Open-Customary Adoption Program? 5. If there was something you could say to your politicians, what would it be? 6. What do governments need to do? 7. Where do we go from here?

Data Analysis

Grounded Theory Method

For this study, the grounded theory method was applied for advancing theoretical knowledge and best practices for First Nation adoption. Grounded theory, as described by Rubin and Rubin, is "based on exchanges in which the interviewees can talk back, clarify and explain their points" (1995, p. 4). Rubin and Rubin further explain that this process has practical implications, such as informing best practices.

In the grounded theory method, the data analysis is not a separate process from data collection (Guba, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman explain that, "from the start of data collection, the qualitative analyst is beginning to decide what things mean and is noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, causal flows and prepositions" (p.11). Similarly, Guba (1990) suggests that the first step in the analysis of qualitative data is to look for patterns or what she describes as "convergence"; this is the task of identifying how the data fit together and how they can be sorted into categories (p. 153). In particular, the *constant comparison method* uses a process of coding, sorting and integrating data to arrive at emerging theory (Charmaz, 1990; Creswell, 1998; Glaser 1978; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Grounded theorists advise that this process begins with eliminating information that is inappropriate and limiting the existing information into categories (Creswell, 1998; Monette, Sullivan and DeJong, 2004).

However, caution must be exercised during this process. In using grounded theory as a method of analysis with indigenous or tribal people, it is essential for researchers to be critical of what is often viewed as *anecdotal* or *irrelevant stories*. This is an area of

Western scientific research that has been perceived as offensive to Aboriginal people. In many instances, these stories have not been understood and/or are dismissed as being anecdotal. However, stories, as a form of knowledge transfer, are important elements in indigenous epistemology. In fact, according to Sinclair (2004), storytelling offers an advantage by using a narrative method. Silverman (1997) places storytelling within categories, such as *cultural* or *collective* stories, which "privilege the social world under discussion and its stories over the stories of the larger society" (p. 109). For the present study, the stories that adoptees shared about their experiences are viewed as informing larger society as opposed to being interpreted as confirming prevailing assumptions or as "stories of the larger society" about adoption and First Nation children. Silverman (1997) further observes that the challenge to researchers is "to understand how and where the stories are produced, which sort of stories they are and how we can put them to honest and intelligent use in theorizing about social life" (p.111).

Discovering Categories

When *coding*, information is organized into *categories*. Through open coding, the transcripts were first color-coded into several main categories as they became apparent: description of the adoption experience including challenges and personal gains, description of the birth family and reunion, health, losses and recommendations. Initially, much of the data could be placed into these broad categories, but subcategories and other new categories also became evident, such as adoptee characteristics and adoptive family and birth family characteristics. As well, some of the themes found in the discussion of adoptee health factors became identified more appropriately as coping strategies in response to feelings of disconnection. Compiling information of family characteristics

into tables helped to describe an ecological context or background for the adoptees. The environment in which they were raised, the impact of relationships with both their adoptive and birth family members, events such as deaths and interactions with their environment were all areas which became organized into an ecological 'picture' through the development of these tables. The creation of tables also helped determine if patterns were emerging around the role of connectedness and health or if the health information needed to be reviewed with the adoptee during a second interview. After the tables were reviewed, it was determined that patterns were indeed emerging and second interviews were not necessary.

After the initial open coding was concluded and preliminary themes were identified, a secondary level of analysis or coding was conducted, involving a review of each transcript electronically using the Microsoft Word application (Appendix F). Each transcript was examined line-by-line and assigned codes by inserting words used by the adoptees as the codes. This form of in-vivo coding refers to the specific use of the actual living words of the participants (Hutchinson, 1986). Examples of coding can be found in ***Appendix F.***

The final stage of coding, axial coding, involved reviewing the codes and placing them into categories to provide an evolving pattern of information that would become the theoretical discoveries of this study consistent with the grounded theory method.

As the coding and categorization unfolded, it became apparent that a unique visual pattern of research results was emerging. For instance, initial findings from this study seemed to support Coles's (2004) assertion that concepts such as the *adoption triad* or situating an adopted child within a concentric model such as Systems Theory's *eco-*

map is not an accurate description of the environmental context for the adoptee. Moreover, the early findings seemed to indicate that a conceptual pattern that emphasizes the interconnectedness of factors, events and people who had an influence on the adoptee, was emerging.

Linking Categories

In order to explore further the initial categories identified through open coding, efforts were made to link the categories by using the constant comparison method. After core categories were identified, the relationship between categories was explored. For example, open coding revealed several broad categories: description of the adoption experience and family, description of the birth family and reunion, health, loss and recommendations. Several sub-categories then could be delineated from this point of entry because further questions began to emerge about the strength of the adoptive family or whom the adoptee reconnected with and why. This approach is consistent with Creswell (1998) who explains that identifying a single category leads to exploring "strategies for addressing the phenomenon, the context and intervening conditions that shape the strategies and consequences of undertaking the strategies" (p. 151). This approach is the basis for the *conditional matrix* or conceptual diagram, which in this study is the formation of a *fractal* diagram (see Chapter Six).

After all categories and sub-categories were established, I looked across coding categories to establish further links among the categories as well as within the categories For example, under the category of health, several adoptees discussed various addiction issues. By investigating this category more closely, addiction issues could be found within both adoptive and birth families. This information led to further questions about

how a possible theoretical proposition could be developed based on these findings. I continued this process until the end of the interview phase when saturation of the categories was achieved. Creswell (1998) describes saturation as a condition where no other example of characteristic codes is found in the breadth and depth of data. Saturation also was detected when I began to *hear* similar themes and concepts in each interview and after reviewing my memo notes and journal entries.

According to Silverman (1997), if meaning and symbols have a cultural base, the researcher must exercise extreme cautious to ensure that "events, actions, norms, values 'are viewed' from the perspective of the people" (p. 64). Following Silverman's advice, the use of grounded theory was balanced with the recognition that the adoptees and key informants in this study were influenced by their experiences with adoption, interactions with adoptive families and birth families, and their environment. .In my analysis I was able to distinguish these nuances of differences in each person's circumstance such as described in Tables 4.2, Adoptee Characteristics, Table 4.2, Adoptive and Birth Family Characteristics, and Table 4.3, Adoptee Health Characteristics. What was remarkable however was that emerging categories and commonalities became apparent.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) emphasize that "grounded theories explain what is happening in the terms of those involved in a situation" (p. 4). While this outcome is one of the inherent values of grounded theory, achieving this outcome poses a critical challenge for a researcher. A researcher must be cognizant of and committed to ensuring that the findings are based on the experiences of those being interviewed and not his/her own. During this study, I found myself challenged by my own personal and professional

experiences with adoption and took steps, such as *memo writing* and *portfolio* work, to balance my experiences with a grounded theory method.

Summary

The Methodology chapter describes the process by which both Western and Indigenous methods were utilized to compliment each other. The use of protocols and ethical procedures were followed to ensure cultural safety while maintaining research integrity. The methods for participant selection were enhanced through the use of a community advisory committee and participants were contacted through procedures which acknowledged their rights to refuse or to withdraw from the study at any time. Talking circles were used to engage First Nation Elders, staff and adoptive parents in a process to enhance the findings from participant interviews. Finally, I was able to engage in prayer and ceremony throughout the research process while also using western tools such as the portfolio and memo writing methods to guide my own process within this important work. I found the process challenging yet an important contribution to how two theoretical frameworks can be blended to work in concert. It is with this in mind that I am honored to present the chapter on Findings.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS – GROUNDED THEORY APPLIED

This chapter is a summary of the journey of connectedness, adoption and health as experienced by First Nation adoptees who participated in this study as captured in categories and sub-categories of themes. It also outlines the categories and sub-categories formulated from the two talking circles held with the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) child welfare staff, Elders of the Advisory Committee for the YTSA Open-Customary Adoption Program, and Board Members of this program. Some members of the Community Advisory Committee for this study also participated in the talking circles.

The chapter begins with a description of participants and their adoptive families and birth families, reflected in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. This is followed by a description of health factors impacting participants as outlined in Table 4.3. A discussion of the adoptees' journeys will be captured in three conceptual models derived from holistic thought. This holistic approach stems from an indigenous framework of analysis and Human Ecology theory, described in the Introduction that places the adoptees' journeys as an exploration of self within a complex environment of factors, events, relationships, health issues and complex life events surrounding First Nation adoptees. Figure 4.1 illustrates the *Cycle of Disconnection* that emerged from the data and demonstrates how disconnection influences health. The model represents how perceptions around lack of connectedness or being "an integral part of the world" (Lee, Lee and Draper, 2001) can result in a cycle where coping strategies have an impact on all aspects of health although they do not remove the sense of loss and the sense of disconnection. According to coping theories, "the impact of life events depends, in part, on the way that the event is appraised" (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, and Mahoney, 2005, p. 61). Through a number

of studies, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) demonstrated that perceptions of events distinctively mediate the impact of events on our emotions. Pargament et al. studied the relationship between loss and health and concluded that "the impact of sacred losses and violations on health and wellbeing may depend, in part, on the way the individual copes religiously with the situation" (p. 62).

Supporting the concept of coping, loss and health, Figure 4.2, *The Holistic Concept of Coping*, is based on the Cree Medicine Wheel that suggests that life is a balance of emotion, physical, spiritual and mental elements. The Medicine Wheel is often compared to ecological models, similar to those found within Human Ecology, and offers teachings of the importance of balance and harmony in one's life. Figure 4.2 also emerged from the data and illustrates the various coping strategies that result from adoptees' loss. Figure 4.3 describes an ecological model of health and connectedness for First Nation adoptees.

For the purpose of this study, each of the 18 adoptees was allocated a pseudonym that was later identified with a number. For example, *Sarah* is *Interview 01*. Although it may have been simpler to allocate a number only, this number only approach posed an ethical dilemma for me. One of the findings in this study is that the removal or change of name has had a significant impact of some of the adoptees who have been left feeling traumatized by this omission or change. To suggest that the adoptees were simply numbers in this study seemed particularly disrespectful and insensitive. In order to facilitate the assignment of names and in keeping with University of Alberta's confidentiality and privacy policies regarding anonymity, each adoptee was asked to give suggestions for their fictitious name. While some of the adoptees were able to provide a

favourite name, others asked me to create a name. I explained that this name would be attached to a number in order to facilitate the analysis of data, but the name would be identified with them to ensure that they could recognize themselves in the study once it was completed.

It is important to note that three of the 18 adoptees were not adopted through a public adoption system. One was adopted through custom in a First Nation family. Two participants considered themselves adopted, but were actually in long-term foster care arrangements until adulthood. The rationale for maintaining these two individuals as part of the final sample is that they described themselves as being adopted and agreed to be interviewed after knowing the inclusion criteria. I was unaware of their unique status until the interview was in progress. At that point, it appeared unethical to stop the interview and to prevent them from making a contribution to the study. In fact, these interviews provided a wider perspective on the concept of adoption than originally anticipated. Specific adoptee characteristics are summarized in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Adoptee Characteristics

Adoptee	Age	Gender	Age at Adoption	Age First Birth Family Contact Reunion	Occupation	Province of Residence
01-Sarah	30s	F	5 yrs	15 yrs	Homemaker	Alberta
02-Marty	30s	M	1.5 yrs	24 yrs	University Student	British Columbia
03-Donna	30s	F	13 months	25 yrs	Social Work	British Columbia
04-Angel	20s	F	3 yrs	11 yrs	Administration	Alberta
05-Billy	30s	M	6 months	20s	Law	Manitoba
06-Arthur	30s	M	3 yrs	18 yrs	Unemployed	Manitoba
07-Eagle	30s	F	2 yrs	20s	Waitress	Manitoba
08-Rose	30s	F	2.5 yrs	23 yrs	University Student	Manitoba
09-Carissa	40s	F**	10 yrs	20s	Office work	Ontario
10-Molly	40s	F*	10 yrs	19 yrs	Consultant Human Services	Ontario
11-Paris	40 yrs	F	1 yrs	13 yrs	Administration	Ontario
12-Carla	28 yrs	F	7 days	23 yrs	Homemaker	Ontario
13-Christina	40s	F	1 month	15 yrs	Administration	Ontario
14-Mona	31 yrs	F	11 months	26 yrs	Student	Ontario
15-Sierra	30s	F	Perhaps 1 yr (unsure)	18 yrs	Social worker	Manitoba
16-Jane	40s	F**	Under 1 yr	19 yrs	Nurse	Ontario
17-Mama Bear	45 yrs	F	At birth	Late 20s	Homemaker	Ontario
18-Buzz	30s	M	2 yrs	16 yrs	Liaison Worker	Manitoba

* The person who was adopted through custom is identified with a single asterisk in the gender column.
** The two people in long-term foster care are identified with two asterisks in the gender column.

The adoptees in this study vary by gender and age. Four of the 18 adoptees are male while the remainder are female. Their ages range from early 20s to mid-40s. Sixteen adoptees were adopted at age 5 or younger while two were adopted at age 10. Seventeen had their first birth family contact during their adolescence or in their twenties while one adoptee met her birth family at age 11. Three adoptees are university students and two are homemakers. Thirteen are employed in professional or para-professional occupations. Their geographical locations include the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario.

Adoptive Family and Birth Family Characteristics

Family structure and composition, as part of an adoptee's ecological context, is another dimension by which the findings of this study can be analyzed. Within Human Ecology and the Indigenous Scientific framework it is recognized that family and kinship play an important role in our reactions to life events since family dynamics are the first experience in which we become socialized (Bandura, 2003; Buboltz and Sontag, 1993; Littlebear, 2000). Dynamics such as addictive behaviour, family norms and behaviours have an impact on how we develop as human beings. Thus, adoptees in this study specifically were asked to describe their adoptive families and birth families. Table 4.2 captures this information.

Table 4.2

Adoptive Family and Birth Family Characteristics

Adoptee	Adoptive Father	Adoptive Mother	Adopted Siblings	Birth Mother	Birth Father	Birth Siblings
01-Sarah	Dutch farmer Family-oriented Dependable	Home-maker who fostered many Aboriginal children Very supportive, encourag-ing Compensat ed for disappoint ments with birth family	Three adopted brothers, one who was also adopted and Métis	Deceased	Deceased	Several sisters Broken promises Put-downs for lack of cultural knowledge
02-Marty	Alcohol problems Physically abusive Has broken contact	Felt unprotected by her Has broken contact	Older and not much contact as a young person or now	Has met her – she has addiction problems – drugs and alcohol She tries to make him feel guilty	Has not met – known to be African Canadian	Close to one brother Sister does not wish contact
03-Donna	Parents separated	Had some personality conflicts with her	NM	Addictions Lashing out and abusive	UNK	Looks like one sister and closest to her
04-Angel	Afraid of adoptive parents		A number of fostered siblings	Deceased	Deceased	Close to one who is now deceased Distant from others
05-Billy	Good decent, hard working Rebellious toward dad	Very close to her Adoptive parents offered help to find birth family	One adopted sister who is Métis	Good reunion with her Deceased	Wants to meet him	Good reunion and relationship with them

Adoptee	Adoptive Father	Adoptive Mother	Adopted Siblings	Birth Mother	Birth Father	Birth Siblings
06-Arthur	Suffered physical and sexual abuse from them Taken to the United States Deceased	Deceased	N/A	Good reunion Now deceased	Never met him Now deceased	One sister in same home – has not seen her in 10 years
07-Eagle	Adopted and taken to the United States Wanted to give her up for adoption	Withdrew affection as punishment	Treated differently than her	Good reunion Alcoholic Ongoing contact – uses T's/R's	Good reunion	One sister – positive reunion
08-Rose	Adoptive parents were foster parents Closer to dad	Horrified about reunion with birth family	N/A	Deceased	UNK	Never met Met one aunt
09-Carissa	First Nation Sexually abused by him	Very strict but felt like she finally had family	N/A	Met but no contact now	Knows who he is but no contact	N/A
10-Molly	Strict but loving	Un-conditional love from both	Good rapport	Alcoholic – attacked her physically when they met	Deceased – committed suicide	Knows of one sister but has not found her yet
11-Paris	Strict Catholic Alcoholic and verbally abusive when drinking Deceased	Mom had Multiple Sclerosis Both Deceased	One sister adopted more like custom adoption – still using drugs One adopted brother who is deceased through suicide	Alcoholic Fear of getting close or attachment Breaks promises	Never met	N/A – says birth family is dysfunc-tional and disappoint-ed in them Close to some uncles

Table 4.2 (continued)

Adoptive Family and Birth Family Characteristics

Adoptee	Adoptive Father	Adoptive Mother	Adopted Siblings	Birth Mother	Birth Father	Birth Siblings
12-Carla	Adoptive parents were foster parents First Nation Now divorced		One adopted sister	Never met but spoke to her on phone – birth mom says she is afraid of bitter feelings from Carla	N/A – never met	Has four siblings and met three – not close
13-Christina	Customary adoption Sexually abused by father Adoptive parents are First Nation	Adoptive mother upset by reunion Grandmother was very good to her and lived with them for awhile	One adopted brother who was also adopted in customary manner	Birth mom not Aboriginal – met her but distanced from her	Met dad by accident – he is First Nation – no significant relationship	One older sibling – distanced from him
14-Mona	Good relationship	Never got along with her when lived at home Parents now divorced	Three brothers	Met her and great at first More attentive to brother	UNK	Went from youngest in adoptive family to oldest in birth family and likes it
15-Sierra	Adoptive family fostered	Tried to connect them with culture but felt awkward	One brother also adopted	Unhealthy relationship	Good relationship with him	Good rapport with one sister
16-Jane	Was strapped Had other foster children Alcoholic	Stuffed food down her throat Deceased	One brother who is deceased	Mom blamed system for adoption Feels like she is parenting her now	UNK	Has fears of birth family Two siblings – brother died and sister on/off relationship

Table 4.2 (continued)

Adoptive Family and Birth Family Characteristics

Adoptee	Adoptive Father	Adoptive Mother	Adopted Siblings	Birth Mother	Birth Father	Birth Siblings
17-Mama Bear	Moved to get away from closest reserve – were French Canadian Still help her out	Raised her son	Two adopted sisters	Deceased	Still searching for him	Met cousins – hurtful lack of acceptance – no contact
18-Buzz	Fought with adoptive father	Still connected	They also adopted his two siblings	Met her – not much else about her	Traditional First Nation man – has issues with him around identity and spirituality	Two siblings now deceased

Note. N/A = not applicable; NM = not mentioned; UNK = unknown.

The family context within an ecological framework for adoptees, as described in Table 4.2, can be summarized as follows. Within the adoptive family systems, 15 adoptees were placed with Caucasian families and three were placed with First Nation adoptive parents. Some of the prevalent issues in the adoptive families are that for 12 of the 18 adoptees, their adoptive families fostered or adopted other children. Six adoptive parents supported the reunion experience. Individually, seven of the 18 adoptive fathers had alcohol problems. Three of four male adoptees reported that they had conflict with their fathers while nine out of 18 female adoptees reported conflict with their mothers.

Within birth family descriptions, sixteen adoptees described drug and alcohol problems with one or both birth parents. Thirteen reported that they had met their birth mothers and ten have not met their birth father, including four who described their birth father as unknown. Most adoptees have good rapport with at least one sibling, but there

was limited mention of extended family, such as grandparents, aunts or uncles. Two adoptees mentioned aunts or uncles. Ten of the adoptees described their birth family as disappointing, unhealthy or dysfunctional. Seven reported one of their birth parents as deceased.

Health Factors

One of the objectives of this study is to examine the relationship of connectedness and health of First Nation adoptees. The issue of health is described by the adoptees in a variety of ways that could be viewed as being holistic. As described in the Introduction, a holistic approach to health considers spiritual, physical, mental and emotional health as a state where one is not separate from the other. In an indigenous worldview, mental health refers to the clarity of thought and emotional health refers to feelings that, for a spiritually balanced person, are expressed with regard to others (Dossey, p. 245). Some of the participants in this study described physical, emotional and mental health issues that they typically attributed in some manner to their adoption experience. Others described feelings of loss, some sort of void or being unimportant in some way. I propose these descriptions fall more in the spiritual range of feeling connected to the universe and being part of something larger than ourselves. Table 4.3 identifies the health related issues.

Table 4.3

Adoptee Health Factors

Adoptee	Physical	Emotional	Mental	Spiritual
01-Sarah	Eczema	Confused	Fetal Alcohol Syndrome	Confusion
02-Marty	Addictions	Depression Anger Does not like being touched	Anxiety Attacks Obsessive	Suicidal Feels like an outsider Confused Running Away
03-Donna	Alcohol abuse Anaemia	Depression at times		Missing pieces of identity - confused
04-Angel	Drugs and alcohol Loss of energy Excessive sleep	Depression Silence for days	Saw psychologist Fear	Suicidal Running away Lonely
05-Billy	Good	Describes some rebellion as normal teenage stuff		
06-Arthur	Alcohol Abuse	Anger	Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Had some counselling	Describes a wall between him and others
07-Eagle	Drugs and alcohol abuse Skin rashes	Fear	Anxiety Attacks Has worked with Elders to address issues	Running away
08-Rose	High blood pressure Stomach ailments	Fear of failure Depression Anorexia	Anxiety Attacks Mutilation Overachiever Time-line therapy	Always searching for something

Table 4.3 (continued)

Adoptee Health Factors

Adoptee	Physical	Emotional	Mental	Spiritual
09-Carissa	Alcohol abuse	Blaming Lived in shame Depression	In counselling	Feelings of detachment Wanting to belong Suicidal
10-Molly	Migraines Kidney problems	Felt unwanted Shame Anger Blaming self Cannot commit	Anxiety attacks Had therapy	Running away Identity issues Felt unwanted
11-Paris	Alcohol and drug abuse Chronic back pain	Co-dependence	Anxiety attacks Oriental energy work Light and sound therapy Anger management Stress management	Knew she was different but did not know why Needs to connect with land for serenity
12-Carla	N/A			
13-Christina	Alcohol	Rebellious Anger		Confused Identity
14-Mona	Alcohol and drug abuse			Does not ever remember being happy
15-Sierra			Confused	Loss of belonging
16-Jane	Alcohol addiction	Anger Hypochondriac	Eating disorders	
17-Mama Bear	Alcohol addiction			Always moving Spiritual confusion Wanted to belong Running away
18-Buzz	Alcohol and drug use	Anger	Saw counsellor	Spiritual confusion

A number of parallels can be found among the health-related issues experienced by adoptees even though they reside in different provinces. Within the physical area of their lives, thirteen adoptees describe using drugs or alcohol as an addiction. Four describe having a stomach ailment or eating disorder. Two report having back problems and three have skin problems. In the emotional area, five adoptees describe experiencing feelings of anger and five adoptees had bouts of depression. Eight have utilized some form of counselling or psychotherapy and six have experienced anxiety attacks. Spiritually, six describe a state of confusion and eight have attempted suicide or have suicide ideation. Five engaged in running away and searching. Two describe experiencing a spiritual confusion while four speak of lost identity as a missing piece in their lives.

Findings from the Adoptee Interviews

A challenge for many individuals who are not familiar with the adoption experience is the ability to comprehend the significance of an adoptee's search for identity and belonging. For some adoptees in this study, this experience has been described as a sense of loss or a vague but constant void that calls out for something. For other adoptees, there is a perception that they are out of step with the rest of the world. I have included a number of quotes to support the findings in keeping with Indigenous ways of knowing and the strengths of storytelling. Cruikshank (1990) in her extensive work with Elders in the Yukon proposes that collaboration between the researcher and the interviewee is critical and that "such a model begins by taking seriously what people

say about their lives" (p. 1). The adoptee interviews revealed extremely rich results and was a process that I will always cherish.

Categories and Sub-Categories from Participant Interviews

Category: Adoptive Family

At the beginning of each interview, adoptees were asked to describe their adoptive families. This contextual information had an impact on the existence and degree of loss for the adoptees. Some of the characteristics of the adoptees' adoptive families, which were found through open coding, axial coding and preliminary analysis of transcripts, were described briefly in Table 4.2. In this section, these characteristics will be examined more closely, qualifying the information through the voice of the participants.

Sub-Category: Age at Adoption

Of the 18 First Nation adoptees who participated in this study, 16 were adopted during infancy or under the age of six. Two adoptees were adopted at the older age of 10.

Sub-Category: Caregiving Environments

Twelve of the 18 adoptees grew up in families where there were other adoptees or foster children. Angel, who had the most in-depth experience with a number of crown wards in her adoptive home, explains:

> I would have been 6 or 7 when they first got kids coming in. After that, they did foster and take receiving kids in for, I don't know, until I was probably 18. And just lots of different kids from I'd say they had about 70 kids come in their house. So that's a lot. (Angel)

Similarly, Sarah had adopted brothers and fostered siblings:

> My brother (was Métis), plus they had other foster kids, other native kids for about, until I was at least 10 or 12 years old they still kept foster kids. Many

native kids too – so we had contact with other native kids coming into our household.

Sub-Category: Custom Adoption

Two adoptees were placed through custom adoption with other First Nation adoptees. Adoption had been arranged through extended family or birth parents. Christina explains:

> Finally, the priest told the grandmother – my grandmother, my biological grandmother – to go and get me and give me to her, since it's going to be her mom anyway. So she did. She said, "As soon as you came into my arms, you stopped crying." And, the priest said at that point that "she knows who her mom is going to be." (Christina)

This type of adoption created a context where the adoptees were exposed to language, culture and community values. However, as Carissa describes, these adoptees were still affected by feelings of loss:

> We were exposed to the language, but we weren't actually taught. We were brought up on the reserve, but we were not raised traditionally. Like, I didn't even know who I was. Oh yeah, I'm adopted, but you know when I realized I was a somebody? When I got my Indian status. Like, yeah, I'm an Indian! (Carissa)

Sub-Category: Long-Term Foster Care

Two adoptees were in long-term foster care arrangements that they describe as an adoptive home because they lived there for most of their formative years. Both of these adoptees had reasons to refuse a legal process of adoption. One adoptee, Molly, explained that she was placed in her home at an early age and remembered her birth family. She felt a sense of loyalty toward her birth parents and told her adoptive parents that her birth parents could not be replaced:

> Well, I called them uncle and aunt and although they asked me if I wanted to call them mom and dad, I said, "No, cause I already have a mom and dad and no-one will ever replace them." (Molly)

Similarly, another adoptee who was placed in a long-term home said she refused to be legally adopted when asked because she did not want to give up her birth name.

Sub-Category: Conflicts

While some adoptees described their adoptive families using characteristics, such as hard-working or loving, other adoptees experienced conflict with a parent. For instance, three of the four male adoptees experienced conflict with their adoptive fathers. Marty described his relationship with his father as abusive and he felt unprotected by his mother:

> I started to think that I gotta get out of this house and that there's no way I am going to survive here because of not only the way my dad treated me, but the fact that my mom really didn't…really didn't stand up for things even though she saw that things were wrong.(Marty)

As well, nine of the 14 female adoptees experienced conflict with their adoptive mothers. Donna describes these conflicts as ever-present:

> I never saw eye to eye with my mother. We always had, I guess, personality conflicts. I was very strong, and she was very codependent growing up. And, I don't know, I was just…our personalities always clashed. We never really got along.

> I never clicked with my mother, I never bonded with her and I always remember, even as a little girl never feeling close to her, never feeling that, you know, I could tell her things. Uhm…so not having a close relationship, you know, like I strayed off on another path, that was the alcohol and the drugs and the running away. (Donna)

Another adoptee, Eagle, explains:

> My mother was – I didn't have a good relationship with her at all. She just…(pause)…she had all these hopes and expectations of who and what and how she wanted me to be, and I didn't meet these expectations. So she was disappointed in me and made me very aware of that. (Eagle)

Sub-Category: Abuse

Seven adoptees had adoptive fathers who were described as alcoholics. In two of these families, the adoptee also was sexually exploited by the adoptive father. One adoptee acknowledges how this experience provided her with the impetus to be strong and independent:

> My dad – like I always think in some way, my dad tried to protect me from himself so he always kept his distance from me, whereas I wanted to be close to him – well until that happened and then after that, I grew to hate him. Kind of different again. My mom was…(pause)…a strong woman, very hard-working. She worked to support herself. She was independent. All the men in her life abused her so she grew up not to depend on men. She taught me that; she gave me that. (Christina)

Another adoptee stated that although her adoptive father sexually abused her, he was a good provider:

> I was adopted when I was nine. I came in (care) when I was five. A lot of things started happening around that time. If I could say sexual abuse, then that's OK, then that's when it all started. My father, though, was a good provider; he always put food on the table, we never went hungry…I don't remember a lot of things, and I think because of the fact that there were a lot of things happening behind closed doors. (Carissa)

A third adoptee recalls:

> But to them it was discipline, like getting discipline with a belt or a razor strap. And, it was all the time getting our pants pulled down. There would be a lot of times where it would hurt, so we'd put our hands behind our – you know, to protect us, but they would still hit us. (Arthur)

Sub-Category: Stability

Seven adoptees confirmed that their adoptive family provided some sense of stability for them. Billy explains:

> I've heard some stories and stuff from friends who were adopted – and I mean, I can't even comprehend because, I mean, I was safe. I always had enough food to eat, there was warm – all the necessities of life were provided, and then some. We always got to go on trips in the summer. I had an uncle and aunt – my Mom's

> sister living across the street, so my cousins were there – the neighborhood was really tight-knit. (Billy)

Rose recalls similar stability in her life:

> I was daddy's girl. I still am. Spoilt rotten, actually. (Name) was telling me the other day, "You were such a princess!" You know what, I was, wasn't I? I WAS a princess! (Rose)

Other adoptees describe their parents' attempts to introduce them to their culture or somehow link them to the Aboriginal community. Mama Bear remembers:

> I went everywhere with him. We'd go out sometimes camping in the bush. It was great. First time I was four years old, that's when I first went to the native people. They had an encampment, I guess, for hunting, and they were still living in tents there. So, he took me there…and I had moose meat, and fish and that kind of stuff. (Mama Bear)

Sierra notes:

> They made sure we knew where we came from. They always made sure we knew we were from a special culture, and very alive culture, but I guess they were too intimidated and shy to do stuff like that (pow-wows) with us – Because I remember being around 8 or 9, I guess and – my mom had said, "You guys come from a culture that's different than ours. Do you want to learn anything about that?" That was her way of opening that door and saying, "If you guys want to learn, then we will learn with you." But when you're children the last thing you want is to be different and so we said, "No, Mom, we don't know anything and we don't want to." And, I kind of wish that they had asked us when we were teenagers. (Sierra)

Sub-Category: Search Process

Each of the adoptees in this study was engaged in a search for her or his birth family at some point in her or his life. Four adoptees were *found* by birth family or community members, but for these adoptees, this experience did not prevent them from engaging in an active process to gain more knowledge, seek out more information and finally meet other members of their birth family and community. The desire of these four adoptees was no different than the other adoptees in their search. Four adoptees used the

Post-Adoption Registry in their province of birth to facilitate a reunion with a birth family member. However, this was not always an easy process, as Billy describes:

> I registered with the Post-Adoption Registry and apparently my file is inactive now but it kept being passed, not sure if it was constant turnover of staff but it was passed and passed and nothing ever seemed to come of it.(Billy)

Eagle had more success with the Post-Adoption Registry:

> Then I got in contact with the Post-Adoption Registry, and I got a letter from them saying, "Please be advised that your birth mother has been in contact with our office." She was looking for me. (Eagle)

Three adoptees received assistance from a First Nation agency, Band office or other Aboriginal organization, such as a Friendship Center. Seven adoptees were assisted through the First Nation Repatriation Program in Manitoba. Some adoptees, like Mama Bear, took a thread of information and followed it across the country to find her birth family and community:

> I knew I was from Alberta. The Registry – I had put my name in there. And, they told me a few things. I waited a long time for this. So, I sold all my furniture. I hitch hiked to Alberta. These ladies didn't want to let me go. I says, "I'm going to be fine." I knew what I had to do. Something was just pulling me there towards Calgary. I knew that much, go there and then find (community) (Mama Bear)

Sub-Category: Reactions to Search

When adoptees began their search for their birth family or when contact occurred, the adoptive parental relationships had a significant impact on the reunions. Six adoptees were supported by their adoptive parents in their search and reunion with their birth family. But, some adoptees were surprised by their adoptive parents' reactions since they felt they had shared a fairly positive relationship with them. For those adoptees who did not have the support of their adoptive families, they experienced torn loyalties and felt awkward. Sierra captures these feelings when she explains:

> I love my mom but I don't think they were…they could have been a little more supportive when my birth mother fell out of the picture, and they weren't because part of them was happy. (Sierra)

Category: Birth Family

Birth family members were described and various factors associated with birth family connection were highlighted in various sub-categories affiliated with the birth family experience.

Sub-Category: Reunion

Every adoptee in this study has reconnected with her or his birth family at one point or another in her or his life. Nine adoptees were over the age of 20 when the first contact was made while eight adoptees were in their middle to late teens. One adoptee met the first member of her birth family at the age of 11. Typically, the reunions were described as an anxious time, provoking excitement, apprehension and some degree of fear among adoptees, but Sarah fondly recalls:

> I was really excited about it. And, I was happy they just started popping up right away like…they were all there. I actually tried to fit in there for a couple of years. I could drive my car. I was driving and I'd go up there all the time and meet people. (Sarah)

Other adoptees felt overwhelmed by the response they received from their birth family. Billy describes this experience:

> My aunt started crying on the phone and said, "We've been looking for him for a long time." Over that weekend, I started talking to a whole bunch of aunts and uncles and my grandparents…by Sunday, I had a long telephone conversation with my mother. She told me I had a brother in (city). Within an hour he called then another one called. They were just overwhelmed. They didn't know – they had never known that they had another brother. (Billy)

However, some of the adoptees had reunions that were colder than they had expected:

> When she first seen me (birth mom) she didn't know what to say. She gave me a hug. She introduced me to her husband, and there were no kids at home. So, we

visited. One of the kids came in and went out for a second, and she said to me, "That's your sister, but I didn't tell them who you were, and I would appreciate it if you not say anything for now until I tell them." And, I said, "OK." So, I didn't say anything, and she introduced me as her friend. (Christina)

Sub-Category: Resemblance

For those adoptees who discovered people who looked like them, for the first time in their lives, the impact of the experience was overwhelming. In meeting her aunt, Rose explains:

> Oh, it was just like coming home! I mean, she looks a lot like me. We have the same eyes – she's only a couple of years older than I am. We have the same quirky sense of humor. Her son would be a year older than my son. (Rose)

Similarly, Billy remarks:

> It was finally a relief because I knew that I actually looked like somebody. Because maybe as a kid and teenager and as an adult, I always went, "I don't look like anybody." I mean, people would say, "You sort of look like your adopted mother and brother – but upon closer examination you see we don't…(pause)…I don't look like them. Now, I know there are people out there who I look like. (Billy)

Jane enthusiastically acknowledged how the resemblance made her feel:

> I felt happy. I'd look at her, and I'd say, "That's where I got my nose from. That's where I got my hands and feet, things like that. Just to see her (birth mom) and be able to take pictures of her with the kids and stuff like that, and I thought, "That's my mom. That's where I came from." (Jane)

Sub-Category: Acknowledgement

Many adoptees spoke about the comfort they felt when they finally were acknowledged by their birth mothers. Marty explains:

> After we met my mom…not that I didn't cry for my brother but I was, you know, I was – I didn't – I was really emotional, but I didn't cry. But, when I met my mom I couldn't hold back anymore because, like, so many of my dreams were my mom, you know. Like, when I got disciplined when I was young and stuff like that I used to cry for her. I used to get mad at her and ask her, like, you know, why was I – why did you give me away and stuff, and she said something really

> comforting to me when – the first words I heard from her was she told me everything was going to be okay and that I was safe now. (Marty)

Marty's words suggest that the reunion is, for some adoptees, an affirmation that they were loved by their birth families after all. This affirmation is a dream come true; the fantasy becomes reality.

However, for many adoptees, the novelty and excitement wore off as they began to be affected by constant disappointment or rejection. Some adoptees described their birth families as *dysfunctional* or *unhealthy*, but the urge to maintain ties remains a traumatic bond that is difficult to break. This experience caused deep emotional pain for each adoptee who had witnessed this other face of reunion. Sarah describes the disappointment:

> Yeah, sometimes my sister would say; "Ya, I'm going to take you on a trip. We're going to go here, and we're going to go down." And then, she'd promise me she'd come pick me up to do stuff with me and then she'd never show up. (Sarah)

Paris shares this experience with her mother:

> I met my mom. I got to know people in the family and a lot of them don't talk to each other. There's always that fighting going on, which I don't understand, because I can't imagine not ever talking to my kids or my brother for any length of time. Sure, we get mad at each other, but this family, they get – you say something the wrong way, and they won't talk to you. And, my mom has pulled that off on me since I met her. I express myself, I confront, and I share my feelings and she's the type that thinks that's wrong and then I won't talk to her for two years. (Paris)

Molly echoes a similarly difficult relationship:

> I was her first child with the husband she loved and that's the only one she married was my dad. So, I always felt special, and she always told me that after I met her. So, anyways, we're talking, next thing, she gets mad at me and started beating me up – I didn't see her for a year after that. Then when I finally did go – I'm always the one to make that move – I went there and then we started to get to know each other. But, I always watch myself, what I say, because I don't want her to reject me again. (Molly)

Interestingly, difficult relationships with birth parents were sometimes offset by positive relationships with siblings. Some of these relationships became more significant than the bond to birth parents, as Sierra describes:

> Then one day, me and my sister were walking, and we meet up with her (birth mom), and she just talked to my sister and not me. So, that's when my sister saw how she was treating me, and she didn't like it. So, my sister cut off ties with her as well and said, "Well if that's how you're going to treat us – like, how can you treat your daughter like that? You just got her back after eighteen years and look how you treat her?" (Sierra)

Donna warmly describes her relationship with her sibling:

> It makes me feel like I belong somewhere. And, I know we will always have a relationship. And, I don't think that will ever be an issue since we've connected since the beginning. (Donna)

The search and reconnection with birth family members provided a number of adoptees with a sense of belonging that they described as missing from their childhood. During their childhood, some adoptees knowingly sacrificed their innocence to abuse to create this sense of belonging:

> Even though what was going on, I guess, I put up with that just to have a family, cause where was I going to go? (Carissa)

Other adoptees during their childhood anxiously sought out a place to belong even if their actions potentially placed them at risk:

> I barely ever came home. If I did come home it was like late at night which got me into more trouble and got me into more confrontation with my (adoptive) dad and then it was like when I turned 15, I just, I just couldn't take it any longer. I just packed my bags. They asked where I was going, and I just looked at them and I said, "I don't know. I just know I don't belong here." (Marty)

Category: Loss

Loss became the core category in this study. Loss was expressed to some degree by each of the adoptees and often was manifested in their health, which for this study has been organized into physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health sub-categories.

The most challenging task in defining a core category for this study was to determine if identity superseded loss or if loss was an overarching category that encompassed identity as one form of loss. By using a constant comparison method of analysis while reading and re-reading the transcripts, it became clear that loss was the overarching core category. As well, this technique also began to reveal an emerging theory of loss unique to First Nation adoptees. It is a theory derived from different ways of knowing and sharing as offered by the interviewees and talking circle participants. Through the use of selective coding, loss became the category by which a theoretical framework was developed and which united the various pieces of data. Each adoptee experienced loss in several areas of her or his life. This loss prevailed in profound ways throughout an adoptee's life, eventually manifesting itself in emotional, physical, mental and spiritual areas. In this study, loss is described as having many characteristics.

Loss, as the main category, encompasses sub-categories that were extrapolated through the process of grounded theory. The sub-categories are *identity, information, names, family members, culture.* These sub-categories create the context for the developing a theory of loss within this study. This theory begins with the most significant loss, the loss of identity.

Sub-Category: Identity

All 18 adoptees explained that their drive to seek out their birth family stemmed from questions about and a longing to know who they are, where they come from, and where they belong in this world. Molly explains:

> For me, I grew up thinking that I was a nobody, like, I didn't know my identity. So, when I was a teenager, I went through an identity crisis because that's when I started realizing I WAS different. There was something different about me. (Molly)

The search for identity encouraged some to begin observing First Nation people for the first time in their life. Mama Bear states:

> When I was 12, that's when I started questioning. I wanted to know more about native people. There was a Hudson Bay store, and I knew they did all their groceries. I was always going there to sit on a bench and watch them. I wanted to know things. I wanted to be a native person so badly. (Mama Bear)

Eagle, who grew up in the U.S. expressed a frustration that she couldn't find anyone to identify with:

> Actually, the schools I went to, yeah, was mostly Hispanic and white people. I always knew I was native, but I didn't know anything about that – like I never even heard the term Aboriginal until I came up here. (Eagle)

For Donna, finding out about her identity is now central to her life:

> So right now, it's identity issues. It's becoming a bigger part of my life, of finding out who I am and putting all the pieces together and finding out about my culture, and I am drawn more to Aboriginal communities. (Donna)

Sub-Category: Information

One of the most frustrating losses expressed by adoptees is the lack of information they received about their birth family, including health histories. For example, some adoptees, who are parents now, were afraid they had histories of chronic

illnesses or that they would end up in a relationship with an unknown relative. Rose recalls:

> My blood sugar went through the roof. My doctor was saying, "You know a lot of this might be genetic. It's too bad we didn't know where you came from." (Rose)

Carla further emphasizes the need for health information:

> There's no need to be bitter after all this time because we have our own families, our own lives now. And, that's basically how I looked at it; it was just to find out who my family was, what my roots were and just health reasons. When I was pregnant with my daughter, they asked me, "Anyone in your family have diabetes? And I was like, "I don't even know." (Carla)

The dearth of all sorts of information was viewed as a loss, leading to a partial picture of a family destroyed or altered through incomplete adoption records and files. This partial picture was extremely frustrating for several adoptees, as Christina explains:

> Finding out I was adopted, the only thing it did for me is confuse certain things. The other thing I was afraid of was, "Who am I related to? Who can I go out with? You know, a relative?" (Christina)

Similarly, Molly notes:

> I went for therapy then I went to read my file at Children's Aid. When I got older, that's when I found out why I was moved from home to home – and Children's Aid never explained to me why my mother never came to get me. (Molly)

The lack of information or confusion about information was as serious as being told a birth mother was deceased when, in fact, she was not:

> So, all this time, I thought my mom was dead. So, anyway, this lady starts looking into different people for my family – some aunts and uncles. When she meets this lady and interviews her and the lady says, "that's not so and so's daughter, that's my daughter." (Paris)

Sub-Category: Names

Names are important for each of us. Names relate to our identity, helping us to establish who we are and sometimes representing someone or something from our family

and culture of origin. Some adoptees in this study discussed the loss of names that were given to them by their birth parents and that identified them in their home community:

> As soon as things started happening where I knew I wasn't part of them or I knew I needed to be my own person, is when I started to use my own name. (Angel)

> I applied for a birth certificate to get a social insurance number and it came back stating, "no such person." So, I had to ask my mom and she started to laugh. I said, "What are you laughing at?" I went to school using these names. "Well that's not your real name." I said, "Well what IS my real name?" And she said, "I don't know." And, I had to do my own investigating. (Christina)

> So, they asked me a few times if I wanted to be adopted and I said, "No, I don't want to lose my name." (Jane)

Sub-Category: Family members

One of the most tragic circumstances in the lives of each adoptee in this study was the loss or death of family members. In most cases, death had occurred before the reunion and the loss caused additional grief for the adoptee who was looking forward to meeting her or his parent. Seven adoptees had a birth parent who was deceased. Angel, one of two adoptees in this study who have birth parents who are both deceased, shares her experience:

> I didn't even know about them (birth parents) really, but I had found out that my dad had passed away when I had went to visit my grandparents – so that was kind of, that was really sad that I didn't even get to meet him. (Angel)

Jane knew her birth father had died, but could not bring herself to go to the funeral:

> They asked me if I wanted to go to his funeral, the worker, and I said no because I didn't know who he was. I didn't know – it'd be like going to a stranger's funeral. (Jane)

For some adoptees, meeting a birth parent, and then losing them through death was a loss which was steeped in a particular type of sadness that was tied to not having enough time to rekindle their relationship:

> My biological mother was beset with bone cancer and at least I got to spend five years with her. The last two years of her life, I spent a significant amount of time with her, to the point where I had started a new job. She called me one summer day. She was at a friend's house in (community), and she called me and she said, "I'm not feeling good. I need you to come and get me." I didn't even think twice. You'd think, some people might think, "Well, they're really strangers." No, it doesn't matter that she gave me up for adoption; this is family. (Billy)

Mama Bear found out later from her birth family that her birth mother died when Mama Bear was 15. At 15, Mama Bear had not met her birth family yet, but had this intrinsic sense of loss at that age:

> At 15, I found out later that's when my biological mother died – when I found my family. I didn't know what was happening to me. I felt a loss, a big loss, and something sad in me was somehow, and I felt lost, and started drinking. (Mama Bear)

The loss of siblings through death, including suicide, was a commonality among seven adoptees. Angel describes her brother's suicide:

> He committed suicide. And, he had called me, I guess, it would have been a week before. I had talked to him quite a few times within that span of time about six months or something, he would call once in awhile and we talked quite frequently and I knew things were up. I knew that they were…he was starting to get…I knew he needed to find something to fill him up or to get out all the stuff that had happened or needed some help and stuff like that. (Angel)

For some adoptees, it seems there is often an extra burden and sometimes self-blame that accompanies the experience of just starting to know a sibling when they are taken away so tragically. Other adoptees like Buzz learned of a sibling's tragic death later on and experienced a deep sense of loss and anger about how his sibling had been treated:

> I heard about what happened to him and it's not a very good story to tell, but it has to be told, because it's part of my life; he was my brother. He was a little baby. Perhaps, he may have suffered the thing I did, was that I was lactose intolerant, so he wasn't able to be fed the formula or the milk that was provided for them. So, in order to shut him up or something, he really got a beating and this was in the winter time – he was thrown into a cold room, and he died. (Buzz)

Sub-Category: Culture

Adoptees in this study also experienced the loss of culture, including the loss of language, traditions and values, ceremonial teachings, spiritual beliefs and ties to the ancestors. All 18 adoptees spoke of experiencing at least one aspect of this cultural loss and described how this loss created barriers for them. Sarah explains:

> I don't think I've ever been invited to one of those feasts for my late sister, like, they were all raised together; they had those feasts without me. I guess, they're traditional and they'd like me to be or they'd hope for me to be whatever, I don't really believe in the traditional way cause I was raised a Christian. Maybe, if I had stayed connected to the Indian reserve, maybe I would learn the language or more of the traditions and more of the teachings and there would have been traditional things – maybe would have been a dancer or something, to attend more spirituality and hunting. (Sarah)

Marty shares a similar experience:

> I was like Indian, like I didn't know what that was – the next Halloween, or as soon as I found out because I was, like, I didn't know what they were so I basically looked at TV and dressed myself up as an Indian for Halloween. (Marty)

As well, Donna explains that she never had an opportunity while growing up to be exposed to Aboriginal culture although she wanted to learn. Carissa, who was raised in a First Nation family, wishes her family could have taught her the language and more cultural traditions when there was an opportunity to do so. Jane felt frustrated when she met her birth mom who could not speak English:

> Then I had an interpreter who spoke the language she did – that would be Cree or something, and I wanted to ask questions like, "Why didn't you come and look for me?" or "Why did you give me up?" "I'm angry." Those kind of things. It was always – the interpreter, when she interpreted back to me said it was the social worker's fault or CAS or something like that – it was hard meeting my mom because I didn't speak Odji-Cree.(Jane)

Angel felt that if she could have had more cultural teachings, it might have helped in her emotional healing in finding herself:

> If I could at least know about what kind of person I was, where I came from, what band and all those things – what my mother's name was and my dad's name and all those things – I needed more interaction with Aboriginal people, instead of white people giving me their idea of what Aboriginal people do. (Angel)

Other adoptees like Mama Bear expressed a similar frustration of not knowing yet feeling like they should have known:

> I would have liked to learn my language and know more about my tradition. That's what I miss; my language and my tradition that I lost it, and it's hard to get back. I'll probably never get it back and my kids lost it, too. (Mama Bear)

Billy, Rose and Christina wished they had been exposed to more cultural events, such as pow-wows and other cultural traditions. Some adoptees, such as Arthur, Eagle, Molly, and Sierra, did not know what tribal background they were from, which they often found confusing or humiliating. Sierra recounts:

> I never really knew until I was eighteen where I was from. I thought I was told that I was Cree, and it wasn't until I was talking with my biological dad one day and he said, "You're not Cree. You're Ojibway. You're from (community) and that's all Ojibway land. I had heard for so many years that I was Cree because that's what I had been told by my adoptive parents and that's what they were told. So, it was a shock, it really was. So, all over the place, I had been learning Lakota tradition thinking I was Cree, but really Ojibway. (Sierra)

Buzz shares his views on what he defines as a type of spiritual confusion that has been extremely difficult for him:

> I feel like I'm against the wall and somewhat pressured in a way, with Christian values versus Aboriginal way of life – especially in how to live a good life. I just feel like I've been pressured, so with these pressures I then started developing these type of feelings saying, "I want to know WHO is EXACTLY right? I want to see it down on paper or something. I want to know exactly. If a lot of that is spiritual views then I want the spirit to come to me and say, "This is how it exactly is!" (Buzz)

Sub-Category: Coping (With Loss)

While the experiences of loss and disconnection will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, the discussion of findings, it is important to note here that loss can also

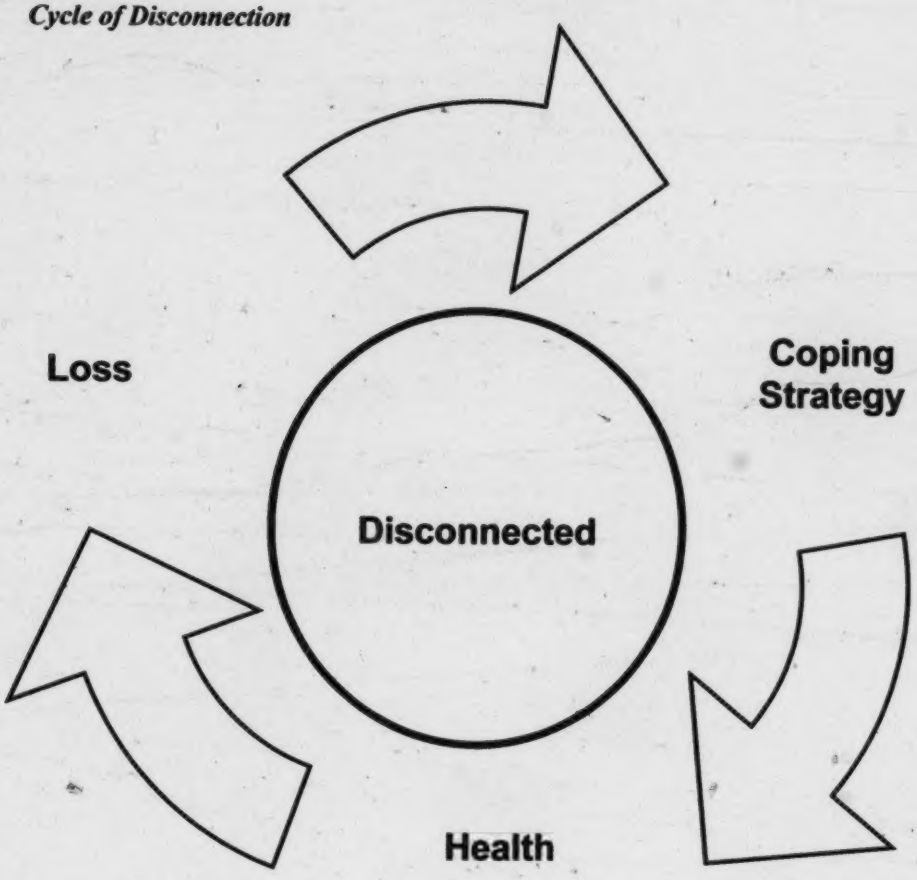
be described as contributing to disconnection. Loss is the core of this study and the foundation for theoretical advancements that will be developed later in the study.

The identification of the category of *loss* led to the subsequent revelation of the categories of *health* and *coping strategies*. The category of health (Table 4.3) was first identified through open coding as well as in-vivo coding and remained intact during axial coding, using the constant comparison method of analysis. Subsequently, a sub-category, *strategies for coping with loss*, began to emerge from the review of health issues. Coping strategies, which are developed to address issues of loss, are specific behaviors that often lead to health outcomes.

The *Cycle of Disconnection* (Figure 4.1), which links loss, health, and coping strategies, appears to emerge from the adoptee experiences. Disconnection lies at the core of this cycle, and health issues are an outcome of the coping strategies.

Figure 4.1

Cycle of Disconnection



The adoptees in this study revealed that they have used a wide range of coping strategies to deal with loss. Some adoptees engage in behaviours that are socially recognized as destructive strategies. These strategies include addictive behavior, which is the most prominent strategy among adoptees in this study, running away, fighting, suicide ideation and attempts, and trouble with legal authorities. Mama Bear recalls:

> The next year when I started walking (after a sports injury), that's when I started drinking. Everything seemed to bother me. All my problems come in one bundle. Before that, I didn't really think about it. It didn't seem that bad. I don't know what happened that year. Then by the time I was 17, the cops would bring me home, and I was running away from home to the reserve – then my parents wanted to move. They never told me the reason they were moving, but I figure it was because of my drinking. (Mama Bear)

Carissa describes her attempts at suicide:

> I tried committing suicide before; tried to jump off the bloody bridge! (laughs) Nothing happened. I tried to freeze myself outside. But, the thing is that I never tried to do was slash, like, slash my wrists because I didn't want to go – if I did it the other way, there was no proof, there was only verbal proof. But, if there's physical proof then that's not a good thing. (Carissa)

Marty used physical violence and fighting to express his anger:

> My elementary school was really tough – I had to go to family therapists because I was really angry. I had, like, really bad temper problems. If I didn't like what I heard or like that, I used to explode. (Marty)

Rose cut or slashed herself as one coping strategy among others, such as over-achieving, to demonstrate her frustration:

> I was a cutter for a while – I cut, never understand why, I just did. But, of course now, you know, you read the psychology books in school now and you find out it was just because you were so in control everywhere else, and you felt like you couldn't control situations around you. So, it was the only thing you COULD control. I don't know what it had to do with. My mother could never figure it out. I think that's why I thought I was crazy for so long because people could never figure me out. (Rose)

Other adoptees describe coping strategies that, perhaps, seem to be more socially acceptable, such as striving for acceptance through over-achieving, excessive pleasing or caregiving of others such as birth family members. Sierra shares this experience:

> So, she soon became someone I was taking care of. I was taking care of her, and I was taking care of my brothers, baby-sitting and stuff like that. Part of me knew I was being taken advantage of, but part of me wanted my mother but I never really saw a negative side of her. (Sierra)

Molly describes her tendency to be a workaholic:

> When I was in that centre for grief and abandonment, I realized that it wasn't them. It was me. I wasn't committed to my marriages, like, I never fooled around or nothing, but I was always gone, like, I'm a workaholic, and I was always gone. I would neglect them because I was neglected. (Molly)

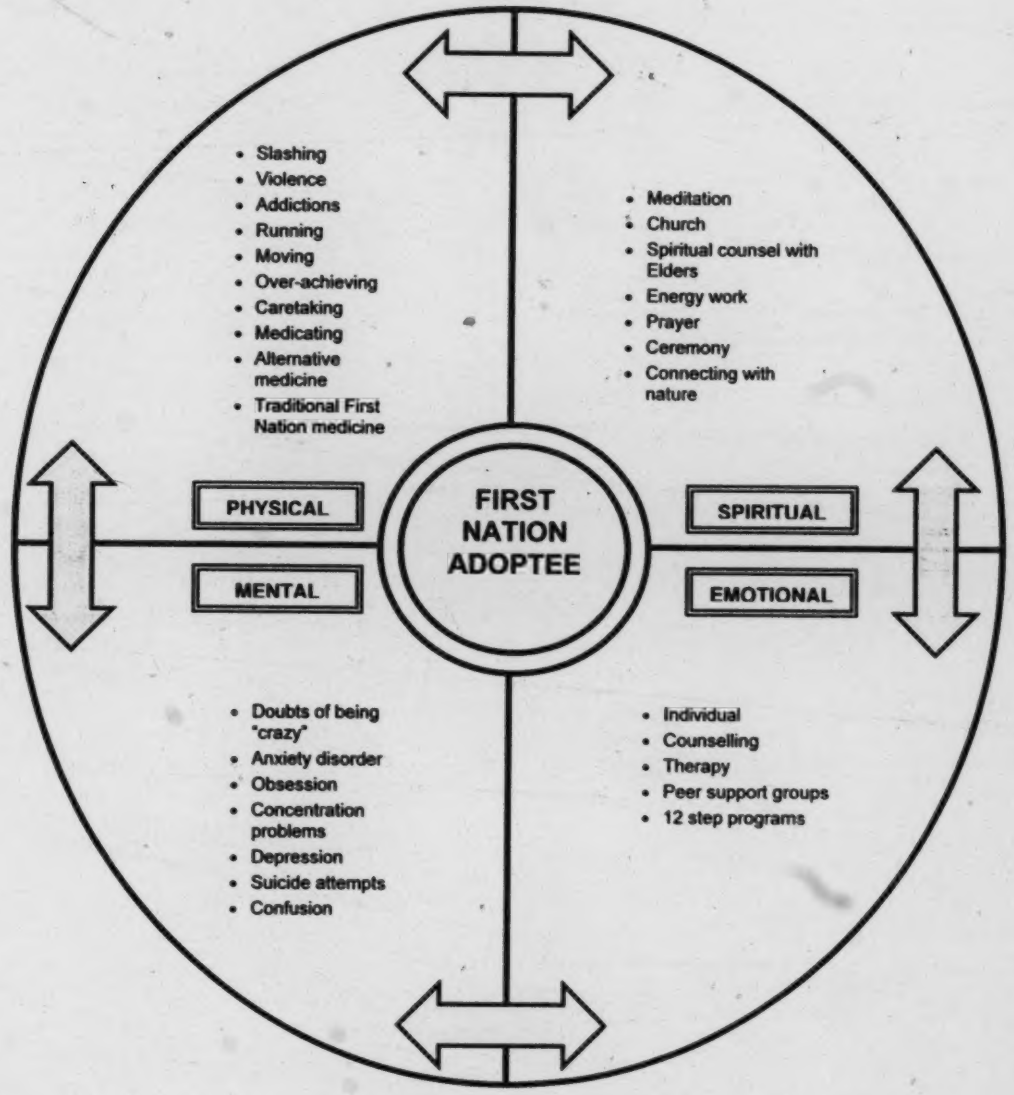
Rose explains her need to over-achieve:

> 'Cause when you're that small, you don't understand the difference between adoption and foster. I always figured if I wasn't – I'm an over-achiever. If I didn't try hard, if I wasn't good, if I wasn't good at everything I did then I'd have to go away too. (Rose)

These coping strategies are revealing, particularly when they are examined within a holistic framework (Figure 4.2). The bottom left of Figure 4.2 is purposefully shaded to draw the reader to some of the categories of disturbances that can be categorized under *mental* health. These mental elements are connected to *physical* responses, such as slashing or medication. Some adoptees, in an effort to relieve their mental anguish, also reached for *spiritual* assistance through prayer or guidance from an Elder. In addition to these coping strategies, adoptees also sought *emotional* supports, such as therapy or a 12-step program. Moreover, adoptees explained that they returned or alternated between these different phases of the cycle throughout their life in a struggle to achieve balance and connectedness with self and others. The cyclical nature of this experience is captured by the arrows in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2

The Holistic Concept of Coping



It is important to point out that the model reflects the impact on the *mental* quadrant of the whole person as an example of trauma associated with the disconnected self. From a holistic perspective, however, it is clear that trauma does not only impact one area of self. It also impacts the spiritual, physical and emotional self. According to Hill (1995), the emotional self is the "energy in motion within our bodies" (p.119). They are the deep buried feelings that can help one deal with trauma and engage in healing. Hill describes four levels of healing:

> Healing takes place on four levels, emotional, spiritual, physical and mental and healing does not necessarily take place simultaneously. Each individual heals differently. Some people first need to become well physically or to "get fit." Others need to read self-help books and understand first. Others need to go through a spiritual awakening through church, traditional ceremonies, 12 step meetings and/or meditation and guidance. Often it's a process of moving from one to the other. (1995, p. 119)

Some adoptees in this study were fortunate to have access to helpful coping strategies, including counseling, alternative health treatments, exposure to traditional medicine people or Elders, peer support through organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, church groups and adoptee support groups. Paris explains:

> I mean I did everything I could think of, everything. But, I have no regrets. I went through treatment, adult children of alcoholics, and that was probably the best thing I could have done. I went to the family program, to anger management, to stress management, light and sound therapy. I went through an Oriental energy thing. Oh I did it all! (Paris)

Some adoptees chose traditional methods as a means of coping and healing. Interestingly, these traditional methods also provided adoptees with an opportunity to reconnect to their culture. Mama Bear recalls her experience with medicine pouches:

> So when I was in jail, the reverend, he asked me, "Any women want to do medicine pouches?" I said, "Well, yeah, sure." So, he did that. He says, "We'll

> get an Elder to come in and bless them." So, I had my medicine pouch in my hand when I had a vision of drugs, and my son was going to be stuck with alcohol and jail, and I seen babies. So, right away, that was my prayer: "Take that away. I don't want it no more. I need my sanity back to look after my kids the way they should have been looked after." (Mama Bear)

Molly attended a welcoming home ceremony at her home reserve that helped in her healing:

> I got a standing ovation, and then they came and did a welcome home ceremony where the whole community came and gave me a hug and they told me, "Welcome home." They hugged me and kissed me on the cheek – and then my aunt, the one who's traditional, the one who delivered me when I was a baby, she brought me to where I was born and we did a ceremony there – she sat me down, and we did our ceremonies, smudging and cleansing. (Molly)

Eagle met with three female spiritual helpers who diagnosed her skin rashes and the scars that appear on her body, which a dermatologist has diagnosed as *spontaneous scarring*:

> I think one, she was a psychic and then another one, she was an Elder and another one, she was a medicine woman – and all three of them told me what these are. They said they are emotional scars from pain that I went through and now it's manifesting itself, you know. It does make sense to me. The doctors didn't know what they were. They're like, "They're scars. Nobody knows why you get them." But why do you get scars? You get them when you get hurt. (Eagle)

Sub-Category: Resilience

During the analysis of the core category of loss, it became apparent that another integral concept requiring further discussion remained. *Resilience* or strength came through clearly while examining the transcripts that described the experiences of all 18 adoptees. And, as part of my commitment to honor these adoptees, I did not want to lose the significance of this resilience by embedding it in a discussion with other categories, such as health. This resilience stood out for me during many interviews. Carissa, who was sexually abused in her adoptive home, explains:

> I don't bring up the past a lot now – and I seem to be a lot happier. I try to be myself. I just want to learn so much. I'm very interested in forensic science. I'm

> also very interested in fine arts. Who knows? Who knows what tomorrow will bring? (laughs) So, all in all, the experiences I've had in my life, I think makes me who I am today, and that's all I have to say. (Carissa)

Arthur shares a similar experience, growing up in a physically abusive environment. He has been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. His resilience is expressed through positive activities, such as pow-wow dancing, and he is an advocate for First Nation adoptees from the Sixties Scoop:

> All the adoptees, they call me and they tell me their stories. I got tears from this side, but they can't see me because at the same time, I went through it. I'm trying to be strong for them, but at the same time, I'm trying to give each adoptee some reassurance that something is being done and that we really didn't deserve this. (Arthur)

Each adoptee, regardless of whether his/her experience with adoption was generally positive, needed to be resilient in order to face life challenges. For example, Billy, who did not identify health concerns, felt his adoption was a positive influence on his life. He needed to be resilient to strive through the challenges of a search and reunion with his birth family. Billy also needed to cope with his birth mom's death, shortly after meeting her. And, of course, he continues facing the ongoing challenges of finding more information and meeting more birth family members.

Finally, one is left to wonder: If the adoptees had the ability to go through the experience again, would any of them want to be adopted in their adoptive home? Of course, their answer is *yes*. The adoptees, who received support and unconditional love, attribute much of their resilience to that nurturing environment. Sarah has been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, but is raising five children with her husband. For the most part, Sarah is doing well and attributes this to her adoptive parents' role modeling:

> I think it was a very good life for me, and I don't think I would have been anywhere near where I am right now if it hadn't been for my adopted parents, that

> they helped me out. They were role models like they don't smoke, and there was no alcohol in the house, at all. (Sarah)

Donna describes the life chance that adoption has provided:

> Having a better chance in life, I guess, with being adopted, you know, whether staying with my birth mother versus being adopted out. And, I think, I guess…I can't say, see I don't know what it would have been like growing up with my birth mom. (Donna)

However, despite these types of experiences, the longing remained for the connection to origin and the connection to the ancestors. Rose reflects on this point:

> There has to be some sort of cultural recognition 'cause so many adoptees that I've talked to, have that entire same thing that I've been through when I was a teenager. Who are you? Where do you come from? To me, a personal opinion is that it comes from the fact that Aboriginal people are so tied to the land. So, knowing where they come from is an ingrained need. That's why I think so many adoptees get so rebellious in their teenage years because they don't know where they are, and they don't know where they come from. I mean, one of the most peaceful places I've been has been in Ontario, sitting on a rock cliff over a lake and thinking, "Yeah, this is home." (Rose)

Category: Adoptee Recommendations

During the interviews, one of the final questions that adoptees were asked was: *What recommendations do you have for adoption programs for First Nation children?* This section is a summary of what the adoptees shared on this topic sorted by various categories (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

Summary of Adoptee Recommendations

Category	Recommendations
Information	1. Information on birth family should be made available to adoptees as soon as they desire it. 2. Health information from birth families is preserved for adoptees. 3. Post-Adoption registries need to be revised to (a) allow access to other birth family members, such as extended family, and (b) provide information to adoptees when they want it. 4. Pictures should be available to birth families and to adoptees. 5. First Nation adoptees need to know which tribe and First Nation they are from.
Adoption Practices	1. Adoption of First Nation children should be in First Nation or Aboriginal homes if at all possible. 2. Connection to extended family and community should not be severed through adoption. 3. If First Nation children are not placed in a First Nation home, cultural training needs to be provided to adoptive parents. 4. Cultural mentors should be provided to First Nation adoptees to assist in reconnecting to their cultural heritage. 5. Adoptive homes need to continue to be monitored by child and family services agencies somehow.
Legislation	1. The legislation on adoption of First Nation children needs to be explored further. At minimum, it needs to be open. 2. Customary adoption requires further support. 3. The rights of adoptees to receive all information about their identity, extended family and community of origin need to be defined further in adoption legislation, policy and standards.
Support	1. Adoptees involved in search and reunion require support services to assist them in these processes. 2. Peer support groups for First Nation adoptees need to be established. 3. Counseling services should be made available to First Nation adoptees

Talking Circle Overview

As previously discussed in the methodology section, talking circles were used in this study to enhance the findings from the adoptee interviews. The key informants for this talking circle included YTSA child welfare services staff, Elders of the Advisory Committee for the YTSA Open-Customary Adoption Program, and Board Members from this program. Members of the Community Advisory Committee for this study also participated in both talking circles, including Elder Bluestone Yellowface, who played a major role throughout the study as spiritual advisor. Two other Elders were present in both circles. Names are identified through the first letters of their names for the purposes of confidentiality as specified by the Human Ethics Review Board at the University of Alberta. However, this is an awkward requirement for working with the Elders in the talking circles. Their coding was prefaced with the letter *E*, meaning Elder, in order to preserve their cultural status and to show as much respect as allowed by Western scientific constraints in this study.

Categories and Sub-Categories from Talking Circle One

The first talking circle was held at the O'Chiese First Nation. Four categories were identified from the discussion during Talking Circle One: roots, community, emotional damage, and practice. Additionally, circle participants were asked to develop questions for the interview guide.

Category: Emotional Damage

This was the core category that was identified from Talking Circle One. Emotional damage is described in sub-categories of loss of relatives for the community, anger, hurt, fear and adoptee fantasies.

Sub-Category: Loss of relatives for Communities

Circle participants discussed the losses suffered when children are removed from their communities, never to be found again. C1 explains:

> We talked about how important it was for family connection to try and keep kids in the community- because we knew once that they went off, it's so hard to get them back. C1.

The loss described by circle members also extends to the losses that adoptees may have to face. Elder M compared it to her residential school experience:

> This is why I want to mention that, I never learn my tradition, it took me a long time after I get out of the convent. I never get to learn some dances for what I was raised in Grey Nuns (school). They never taught us like Sun dance and sweats and all that way of doing, the pipe and all that. We never get to learn that. Nothing. They use to tell us it was a sin. E-M.

L describes the need for adoptees to know who they are and who they are connected to in their birth families and communities. She tries to explain this need by placing herself in the third person as an adoptee:

> They know that there's someone out there that looks like them. They know there's someone that may, you know, share some of the things that they do, and they can't understand why they do it. The other thing I think about, I notice the emotional part that I think for some reason some of them want to know – (asks questions as if she's an adoptee) like health-wise as they get older, like what are some of the things my parents did? Or my extended family – what I need to know about now. Like there is some history there, and it's missing for me for whatever reason and how can I find out about that? L.

Sub-Category: Anger

Many of the circle participants shared their experiences of knowing adoptees who are still carrying a great deal of anger, stemming from the losses they have experienced:

> Unfortunately, a lot of adult children that were adopted are never coming back. Those kinds of issues. And, some of the biggest issues being substance abuse – the ones that stay, you know, and we're also seeing mental health issues and there's still a lot of anger. C1

> Like, they come back to their families that they were put up and most of those adoptees, their families chose not to look after them when they were babies. Like, they gave them up or left them abandoned, and I think that's always going to – an underlying feeling of hurt and anger in these people. C2

Sub-Category: Hurt

Elder B spoke of the wounds that some adoptees have from the losses they have experienced:

> And, she said that based on her experience again like this…the health issue that she can think of is that they are emotionally wounded when they are not with their parent and handed to somebody else. You have to be so careful with them and tell them about who they are, where they belong and if you can possibly, you know, make them…force the connection, have a connection with them. C2 translating for E-B.

Sub-Category: Fear

V shared with the circle a story about one of her relatives, a niece, who returned to her home community as an adult. V's niece had come for a funeral and exhibited some apprehension around her family:

> My niece was adopted to a white family and the first time she came home was for my mother's funeral and…she finally decided, "Yeah, I'm going to learn a little bit about them." I remember one night she came over to my place, and I tried to get her to sleep in the bedroom, and she said, "No aunty, the couch is fine. I'm fine." I don't think she slept all night. It was after that that I think she came for a couple of Christmas parties. Just before that I don't think she had very many connections with Natives 'cause she was…you could tell, she's afraid. V.

Sub-Category: Fantasy

Some circle participants explained that the fantasy in which adopted children and adults live in causes some problems for them later in life:

> So, I certainly think I can empathize with our children that go into care and things they go through, and it doesn't matter what kind of situations we take our kids from. They still have that fantasy of, you know, having it better. C1.

Category: Roots

The circle participants, such as H, spoke of roots and belonging as being important to children in care of public agencies adoption:

> Over the years, I've certainly met and dealt with a lot of First Nation children that have been adopted out into Caucasian homes. I can say that in dealing with them, it always seem to be an issue around needing to know who they are and where they belong. And certainly the most healthy as they have grown up are those who have had visits, contact and have known their family of origin. Even if it's not their biological mom and dad, at least it's family. And that's been a vital, vital piece. Those children who have been cut off from their communities, from their families, seem to be the ones that have grown up very angry, very dysfunctional in many ways, and I want to say stunted emotionally. H.

H, who also is an adoptive mother, shares her observations about her own daughter's search and need for roots over the years:

> So instead of, you know, these children having to wait until their adulthood to come back and then struggle and again watching my daughter, at one level she was happy to know who her biological mother is, but, on the other hand, it was almost like it was too late because she didn't get the connectedness that I think she wanted. And, I find that very heartbreaking for children. And, she says, you know, I mean that that wasn't what she was looking for so then I have to question what it is that they are actually missing. She said, "No I have my mom and dad and my brothers." Okay, so what piece was it that drove you all those years to – s and I believe it's the roots. I can't put it any other way. H.

The salient sub-category under *roots* is the need for a sense of belonging.

Sub-Category: Belonging

This sense of belonging was explored by circle participants who have observed this need in the children they have worked with. C2 took a little boy to visit his First Nation community for the first time. She describes the little boy's reaction and discusses his sense of belonging in a community with his people:

> He just wanted to be connected. He just saw Indians and he didn't want to be…"I want to live here," and he was weeping and he was crying. He didn't want to

> leave. He just felt like he was told, and he was just a little boy. He was about 11 or 12, and he understood. "This is where you're from. You know, you're a band member from this reserve. This is your community…this is, you know, the community where you're from." And, he didn't know anything about the people, the community. He wanted to be there. He didn't care what (community) was like or the people were like. He just wanted to be there, and it made me so sad it made me cry. C2.

A sense of belonging, particularly as it relates to an adoptee's extended family and community, was explored under the category of *culture* where the sense of roots is deeply connected in First Nation communities.

Sub-Category: Culture

> She says, "I taught them our traditions because they're native children and she is able to do it. "That's important they have to know about their spirit their…who they're related to and she said I teach them all those things." (C2 translating for E-B.

C1 discusses the importance of involving the Elders in YTSA programs and the important role that culture and spirituality have played in the development and implementation of these programs:

> We thought that it was going to be different than what it ended up being, but it was worth it, you know, going through all the steps and the biggest reward was having the Elders involved right from the beginning and being our guide and teaching us. And, you know, teaching us to remember what is important for our First Nation people and about our culture and how to do things with a good heart in a good way. And, I think, you know, certainly, I think things happen because of their prayers and because of their involvement because we all wanted to do it in a good way. C1.

Category: Community

The focus on community was prevalent throughout the circle discussion. It became the core category given that circle participants described First Nation communities as the primary environment to place First Nation children in need of family.

The discussion focused on the strengths of and resources that can be offered by First Nation to children who require adoption. Elder M asserts:

> We want our children that are out there, out where, not in adoption or in foster homes, we want them back in our community. We should take care of our children, our great grandchildren. E-M.

This sense of community was identified strongly in the sub-category of extended family.

Sub-Category: Extended family

> I still believe that the priority should be given to extended families. And, if we can't do that than certainly with another First Nation family because…because it's already a lot of unspoken stuff. C1.

The Elders spoke about how traditional family structures are sometimes complex and often seem difficult for those who do not understand First Nation extended families:

> She said they are my children. I'm their mother. And, the girl looks after her, she's like a daughter to her. She's talking about it like she's actually her granddaughter, but she's always been mother to her. And, the Indian tradition, like her husband, she was telling me about it the other day, like this is her granddaughter, but to her, she's her daughter so her husband is her son-in-law, and she shouldn't talk to her son-in-law, eh? (laughing) And, I guess that boy talks to her like he knows she's the granddaughter and he calls her Kokum (grandmother). And he talks to her, like, and, she sits there kind of uncomfortable when some of the things he says to her and teases her. But to her, she's her daughter. I'm your mother in law! C2 translating for E-B.

Elder S reflects on the traditional role of grandparents in raising children in need of homes:

> You know, as far as adoption, you know, there's always been adoption in the First Nations. As far back as First Nations existed, there was always adoption. You know, they used to, when there was an orphaned or anything that the kid's alone, you know, these older people they use to adopt, adopt that baby. You know…without questions asked or involvement of the government. And, they used to, the kids really believed in it too as they grew older. They used to respect, you know all grandparents, they love their kids, you know they loved their grandchildren. E-S.

L concurs with these reflections and looks back on her career as a social worker:

> But, truly when I began to realize that we had to do something different was when I was a social worker, and I realized that taking kids from families in the community wasn't working. And, we all know that, anybody that's worked in this profession. What way can we do it better? I still believe in keeping them in the community. L.

Category: Practice

The category of practice includes a discussion about practice issues in the field of adoption and First Nation children identified by circle participants. Practice issues relate to necessary resources such as homes and the need to examine adoption from a traditional worldview which is inherent in customary adoption practices where whole families raised children.

Sub-Category: Shortage of Homes

The YTSA staff advised that the number one challenge is the difficulty in finding adoptive homes in First Nation communities because of the myths and government involvement in adoption:

> We couldn't find enough good homes to place our kids in. And, that adoption, don't even talk about adoption because you can't even do any better things and so it's been an ongoing challenge...and, you know, it makes me angry that there aren't enough good native homes. C1.

> A lot of people would willingly take these children into their home, just say, "come live with us," you know. But, it doesn't happen anymore because of all the government hardship you know. And, I think that would be a challenge for us to change that and make it into something more positive and more, like, do it for love, from the heart. C2.

Sub-Category: Customary Adoption

Some of the circle participants reflected on what is needed to maintain customary practices in adoption:

> I think about what E-B says and E-S and E-M says. It's something that's been practiced for thousands of years and was never recognized was in place, you know, the way the community operated. I looked into some of those stories and

> whoever was in the leadership role at that time took the responsibility to make sure that children stayed in the community. L.

C1 describes her pride in the first open-customary adoption ceremony for the YTSA.

> I was so high, I was like, I was there but I wasn't there. I was so excited, and I was so emotional. I was so proud of everybody. What a wonderful feeling to have all of the people come there and gather and honor the families in a good way and everything and no secrets, you know, having the traditional ceremony and really trying to do something in a good way. I mean we couldn't go backwards and we – what was there was working for us so I think really finding that balance was something special – those are the rewards overall you are responsible. C1.

Although the open-customary approach to adoption is promoted by the YTSA as the best option, Elder B provides some cautionary remarks about some shortcomings in this practice.

> She adopted these children and it's been…the hard part has been like trying to be a parent to someone else's children. It has been really hard for her, and she's had to try twice as hard as her own – like she wants them to feel at home, so she doesn't really want to get after them and, you know, that's been a challenge. She doesn't want to hurt their feelings. C2 translating for E-B.

Category: Recommendations for Additional Questions

The purpose of *Talking Circle One* was also to seek suggestions and input from circle participants about the interview guide for the adoptees (Table 3.1). The circle participants requested that two additional questions be included in the guide: (1) What were some of the things which were done right with the adoption? and (2) What could have been done different?

Categories and Sub-Categories from Talking Circle Two

After the opening prayer for the second talking circle, I shared the preliminary results from participant interviews with the circle members. My presentation was followed by a long period of silence at which time I was not sure what to do, except remain silent myself. I had found myself becoming emotional during my review of the

preliminary findings as I recalled each adoptee whom I had interviewed during the last few months. During the silence, I remembered my travels to other provinces and the long telephone conversations with people I did not get to meet, but who had generously shared their life with me. Someone finally spoke. It was C1 who began. She spoke of the stories contained in the interview transcripts and how she and the rest of the group had somehow hoped that things would have been different for these adoptees. She was saddened that they were not as healthy or emotionally intact as she had envisioned since most of them had been raised away from their family and community. After all, this part of the fantasy in adoption – that children will be raised in families who are "better" than their birth family. C1's opening comments assisted others to speak. I was honored by their words of encouragement and hoped the findings of this study would be useful and worthy of further dissemination.

There were four major categories stemming from the discussion during Talking Circle Two: spiritual work, challenges, best practices, and recommendations for follow-up to this study.

Category: Spiritual Work

Spiritual work was the core category that surfaced from the second talking circle. The circle participants discussed the painful yet rewarding gifts that are provided through spiritually challenging work that people are engaged in because of a sense of purpose and a commitment to improving the human condition.

> I think people are chosen, and I think they're still here because they're committed, and they need more support. They need more support from the leadership and they need more support from the Elders in a good way. P.

Elder B was assisted through a translator to talk about *chosen* work. This is the type of work that spiritualists believe we are chosen to do while we are on our earth walk. Battiste (2000) proposes that:

> A unique spirit within each of us strives to express itself, to be recognized, to have a name and a destiny. Each one of us is born with the innate spiritual optimism that our existence is not irrelevant but an important part of the larger pattern of life. (p.5)

This is the type of work that E-B suggests is *chosen* work and she expands on this by making the following statements, assisted through translation:

> She said that everything happens for a reason, and that includes the paths that the children go through when they go through hardship. The Creator put us all on this earth, and we have work to do, and all of the experiences that we go through, whether they be good or bad, is a learning experience for all the people of the future. E-B.

> I guess one of the things that stood out for me when B was speaking is that we all have our personal journeys. From what I understood by her statement is that everybody has a journey and some people survive. So you know, being adopted out, that's their journey, their last long journey and not to forget that. We all have our own struggles, but to learn from them. And, we've got to work with our hearts here. H.

Category: Challenges

Although protecting and ensuring care for children has spiritual meaning, it also comes with challenges. After hearing the preliminary results that I shared with the group at the beginning of the talking circle, the circle participants addressed some of these challenges.

Sub-Category: Political Pressure

C1 spoke of the need to lobby leadership at all levels to ensure adoptees have a voice:

> We need to have a national voice. Our kids have to have a voice. Our First Nations kids and we need to pressure national councils like this to take a stand. C1.

Sub-Category: Systemic Barriers

Some of the most glaring systemic barriers discussed by the circle participants include legislation, financial resources, and jurisdiction.

> And, it's critical timing because the new legislation is going to be implemented, and we'll start losing more kids if we don't do something. That's been my fear. C1.

> I think we haven't done enough in the area of reconnection because even as we continue on the child protection piece that we're legislated to do, we still do it in a different way. And, we still believe in the connection part of it. F.

> I look at everything, and it always comes back to money. Money rather than helping kids and doing good work. C1.

Elder M similarly shares this frustration:

> And our community's always broke. When you want to do something, there's no money. E-B.

Sub-Category: Jurisdiction

C1 and L identify jurisdictional barriers:

> We get caught in jurisdictional disputes and that's another issue that's never going to go away. The on reserve and off reserve staff, even the claim to our children. The moratorium that the chiefs had made, it's not being honored anymore. They said it's a myth. They even have a government document stating it's a myth. As we are speaking, they are trying to find a way to erase that directive and they're trying to find ways to not have the chiefs and council members approve of the adoption by council resolution. And, they're not going to consult with the First Nations, they're not going back to the chiefs, they're just going to do it. C1

> And everyone is stacked against us – the appeal panel, you name it – the foster parents, children's advocate. They all line up, and it's like them against us. I mean we fight and fight and at the end of the day, we give in because we say, "Okay maybe they're all right and we're wrong." Then ten years later, it happens exactly the way we predicted. And who suffers? The kids that get rejected when they're no longer cute little kids when they become those obnoxious teenagers (laughs). L.

Category: Best Practices in First Nation Adoption

The circle participants also shared some of their experiences and knowledge about best practices and the adoption of First Nation children. After they reviewed some of the categories and themes identified from the adoptee interviews, some of the circle members reflected on what works in a First Nations context regarding adoption. It became clear that community support and networking for adoptees was a process that the YTSA could develop and envision for those adoptees who returned to their communities, one of the five Yellowhead Tribal Council First Nations.

Sub-Category: Mentoring

> I guess what I was going to say is that it answered some of my questions about people who come here and get a tour, and then that's the last we ever see them. Then even community members question what's wrong with us. Some people, it doesn't have to be a family person – maybe we have to do some networking within the building. Maybe, when people come here, you can direct them our way and maybe we can hook them up with a family or extended family. We have to take responsibility to educate, that's part of it, too. They have come that far, you'd like to see them have success. F.

> Who will take that extra effort 'cause it's not part of our job description? That'll take time to find family and make that connection for them, or give them some history or find out the history for them. 'Cause I always think kids are going to come back and we're still be living here in the community. P.

Sub-Category: Procedures

Some of the YTSA staff discussed procedures to facilitate reconnection:

> What I'd like to do is for L to organize an Elders' advisory committee – and look at these recommendations – to look at our policy manual and make it more real – maybe we could look at our own registry that when adult adoptees come back, like what F was sharing, what do we do and how can we deal with it in each community? Maybe, that dream we had a long time ago, so we could pick it up and find those host families within our communities and the Elders and work with those adult adoptees. C1.

Category: Recommendations from Talking Circle Two

Another objective of the second talking circle was to receive recommendations from the circle participants regarding the dissemination of the research results. The circle participants made the following recommendations about how to publicize the findings of this study:

1. It is important to put pressure on politicians and leaders by sending results to national organizations, such as the First Nations Caring Society, Assembly of First Nations, and the Adoption Council of Canada.
2. The Ministry of Children's Services in Alberta should receive a copy of this study to inform the development and amendments of legislation and policy for the adoption of First Nation children.
3. The study should be published as broadly as possible.
4. Findings from this study should be discussed at national and provincial conferences on First Nation Child Welfare beginning with the Annual First Nation Child and Family Services Conferences.
5. The findings from this study should be used to develop and publish a First Nation theory of attachment that stems from Aboriginal ways of knowing.

Summary of Two Talking Circles

In summary, the categories from Talking Circle One addressed the issue of *emotional damage* that can occur with a lack of connectedness to family and community for First Nation adoptees. Circle members highlighted the importance of *roots,* a sense of belonging (referred to as connectedness in the literature), knowing who you are and where you come from. The strengths and importance of First Nation *community*

connection was discussed, and in particular, how the extended family plays a key role in transmitting family history and values. First Nation child and family practice such as customary adoption was presented as a valuable option for First Nation children. The outcome of Talking Circle One also included the development of questions for participant interviews.

In Talking Circle Two the core categories included a discussion on *spiritual* or chosen work that inspires many people to engage in caring for children in need of alternate care. *Challenges* were identified such as the interference of politics, systemic barriers such as funding and jurisdictional issues. Circle members in Talking Circle Two brought up the issue of Best Practices as some members did in Talking Circle One. Services, such as mentoring to adult adoptees returning to their home communities and procedures to ensure that a connection is made at the community level, were viewed as important components of practice with adult adoptees.

Both talking circles were extremely helpful to inform adoption practices for First Nation children. Talking circle members were comprised of Elders and adoption practitioners including some who were adoptive parents. They had extensive wisdom to share with me and helped me to understand the complexity of First Nation community-based adoption practice, which is critical if this research is to be meaningful and beneficial. Time and time again, it seemed that the discussion returned to the importance of *community*.

At the end of Talking Circle Two, C1 helped me to develop my conceptual thinking about these issues by offering the simplicity and wisdom of the Cree Medicine Wheel to reflect on the processes that had unfolded to date:

> I remember when we started custom care we went to the Elders and the tool they gave us was the medicine wheel. So, I drew this for J (the researcher). So, really the first part of it was the talking circle (Talking Circle One), and we had questions and we gave her our hopes we had for the research that she had. I think that, if I can remember, those dreams, those wishes that we had for her research was pretty right on, and that was really the mental part of it. And, the interviews that she did with all those people who came forward, another emotional part of it. Today, the second circle, we also heard about the physical pieces of it, pieces of it that – we had good guesses, but really didn't know. Then, I think of the ending ceremony, if we can honor the people who volunteered to be interviewed, with a spiritual ceremony then that's the spiritual part of it. C1.

For me, as the researcher in this study, there is no greater honor than to hear these words from this circle and to take these teachings with me as I proceed to discuss what I heard through every story, every movement, every tear. It was more than data that was shared with me over these last few months, it was a collage of life histories and life work, shared with me in hope that things might change for First Nation adoption. This placed me in a situation where I am obligated to provide as much insight as I can to the reader of these words, on the critical points raised by those who know – the adoptees from across Canada who participated in the research through interviews and their relatives, as we all are, who shared their wisdom in talking circles.

Talking Circle Two members made recommendations on the dissemination of results and for best practices in the adoption and First Nation children:

Table 4.5

Summary of Talking Circle Two Recommendations

Recommendations
1. It is important to put pressure on politicians and leaders by sending research results to national organizations, such as the First Nations Caring Society, the Assembly of First Nations, and the Adoption Council of Canada.
2. The Ministry of Children's Services in Alberta should receive a copy of this study to inform the development of and amendments to legislation and policy for the adoption of First Nation children.
3. The study should be published as broadly as possible.
4. Findings from this study should be discussed at national and provincial conferences on First Nation Child Welfare beginning with the Annual First Nation Child and Family Services Conferences.
5. Use the findings from this study to develop and publish a First Nation theory of attachment that stems from Aboriginal ways of knowing.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This chapter reflects back on the research question reflected in the objectives: *How does connectedness relate to health for First Nation adoptees?* This is accomplished with two approaches. The first is to review key findings and place them within a framework based on both Indigenous Science and the concepts of Human Ecology. These perspectives help to understand the context of First Nation adoptee experiences in terms of spiritual connectedness and a spiritual ecological system. In particular, this section proposes a conceptual framework for a theory of spiritual loss stemming from the lack of connectedness experienced by First Nation adoptees. These developments arise from the application of grounded theory as well as indigenous processes, such as the involvement of Elders and the use of prayer and ceremony.

The second approach compares the findings from this study to findings of other significant studies that examined the outcomes of First Nation adoptees in non First Nation adoptive homes. The discussion will also examine the findings within the broader context of literature on adoption, and First Nation adoption. The discussion concludes with a summary of how connectedness influences health for First Nation adoptees.

Key Findings – Participant Interviews

Key findings are discussed within the theoretical frameworks and bodies of relevant literature. The following is a summary of key findings for this study.

Adoptive Families

The findings within this category describe a cohort of adoptees, most of whom were adopted during infancy, with the exception of two participants. Twelve of the adoptees, a significant number, were raised in families where there were a number of

foster or adopted siblings. Three adoptees were placed in Aboriginal adoptive homes and two of them were in customary adoptive homes where their birth mother or an extended family member had arranged their adoption. Participants describe benefits and conflicts in their adoptive families. The benefits as described by some were stability, reliability for tangible support such as child care, and a sense of protection as they were challenged with birth family contact or disappointments. The challenges included abuse for seven of them which included physical, emotional and sexual abuse. This was one of the most disturbing findings in this study. A significant turning point in their lives was searching and meeting birth family members. The reaction of their adoptive families was mixed. Six of the eighteen were supported by their adoptive families to pursue the need for knowledge and information about their roots. Those who weren't encouraged were disappointed in the reaction of their adoptive family and felt conflicted with torn loyalties.

Birth Families

Every adoptee in the study became reconnected with their birth family and/or community of origin at some point in their lives. Nine of them were in their mid-twenties when the reunion occurred, while eight were in their mid to late teens. One adoptee was eleven when she was introduced to her siblings. Not all adoptees conducted an active search as some of them were surprised by birth family members finding them. Reunions were marked with excitement and anxiety. Some of the participants were overwhelmed by the response of large extended family networks and some were saddened or disappointed by what they perceived as a cold reunion experience. One of the highlights of reunions for the participants was to finally meet people who looked like them,

suggesting that resemblance to someone is an important factor to consider in adoption. It was also important to be acknowledged or receive some affirmation that they had not been forgotten by their birth families. There were also challenges in reunions. Disappointments occurred for the adoptees when birth family members did not show ongoing commitment to a relationship with them, in particular birth mothers and fathers. Adoptees in this study were interested in meeting both of their birth parents. Positive relationships with siblings seem to offset difficult relationships with birth parents. Overall, in spite of difficulties and challenges, birth family reunions provided a sense of belonging and connection in a greater degree to the world at large.

Loss

The major loss identified by adoptees in this study is identity. All eighteen participants indicated that the need to know their birth families stemmed from longing to know who they are and where they came from. In describing identity issues the adoptees referred to feelings of being different than school friends or others in society. Part of feeling different urged them to begin observing Aboriginal people whenever they could and interpreting how they fit into Aboriginal societies. The loss of information was described as fundamental to their development. Participants described fears which arose from ignorance around their genetic history or health. Some participants were told they had no birth family when they actually did. The loss of names for all adoptees in this study was an important issue; without their birth names they could not place themselves within their birth family, community and culture. Some adoptees had lost birth family members such as parents or siblings and were grieving because they would never meet them. Loss also occurred when a birth family member died after meeting them and a

relationship which was just forming was taken away again. The loss of culture was described by all participants as a factor which created barriers for them. Not knowing who they were as First Nation people, their customs, language and traditions, interfered with their link to their birth families, frustrated and embarrassed them. Some described how they thought they were from one tribe and found out they were from another.

Strategies for coping with loss were a major factor within the category of loss as these strategies impacted participants' spiritual, emotional, mental and physical health. As identified in Table 4.3, the description of the health factors in seventeen of the participants is significant to this study. One participant described himself as quite healthy. As health is a principal concept in this study, it is important to review these findings in the discussion. The discussion will center on how connectedness to birth family and community relates to health from the perspective of these participants.

It is also important to examine key findings from the two talking circles as part of this discussion. They are as follows.

Key Findings – Talking Circles

Talking Circle One

In this circle, members spoke of the emotional damage they have observed during years of working with children who were separated from their birth family and community. One participant who is an adoptive parent provided insights about her daughter's experiences. In spite of her positive relationship with her adoptive parents, her daughter stated that she felt something was missing. Another circle member who is an Elder and has adopted many children through customary adoption supported this by stating that she always reminded that she is not the parent of these children but has this

great love for them which sometimes presents conflict. She does not want to lose the children but she understands their need for connection to their birth family. Other circle members who were staff for YTSA described their work over many years with children who wanted to be with their birth families in spite of being abused or neglected by them. These circle members stated that this comes from a need to belong. Community strengths and resources such as the child's extended family were discussed. Some circle members expressed that the absence of children missing through adoption alters the continuity of First Nation communities. Some circle members addressed how First Nation agencies are limited by provincial adoption practices as they do not have the resources necessary to maintain adoption programs under provincial standards. Circle members in Talking Circle One also gave suggestions for questions for participants in the study.

Talking Circle Two

In Talking Circle Two, preliminary results were presented from participant interviews. Circle members spoke of the spiritual importance of this work and how staff members who work with children in foster care or adoption are chosen by the Creator. Circle members discussed the challenges of this work including barriers such as financial resources, legislation and jurisdictional issues among First Nation, federal and provincial governments. Once again the issue of best practices was discussed for adoption and some attention drawn to how First Nation agencies can support adult adoptees who return to their communities. Programs such as mentoring services and procedures such as receiving families (families who would offer a home in the community) were viewed as possible assistance in the area of repatriation for adoptees. Talking Circle Two also

produced some recommendations for future dissemination of findings from the study as well as other recommendations in First Nation adoption.

Theories as Guidance for Discussion

The discussion continues with the use of two theoretical frameworks to guide the discussion of key findings.

Indigenous Science

Indigenous processes are an integral part of this study. As described in Chapter Three, this research journey was predicated on a ceremony, a women's sweat where prayers and offerings were made to guide the research process. I also approached Elder Bluestone Yellowface for her blessings and teachings about this journey. For example, following Elder Bluestone's advice, a pipe ceremony was held with the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) Open-Customary Adoption Program staff and Board Members prior to the interviews. Talking circles, as an Aboriginal way of knowing, were used to receive information from key informants, such as Elders. Appropriate protocols were honored prior to each talking circle with offerings of tobacco and gifts for the Elders.

This theoretical framework guides the following model that demonstrates the impact of relationships and connectedness in our lives. Using the tenets of the medicine wheel, the model also borrows from contemporary, western mathematical thought which relates to *quantum physics*, a theory that is inspired by spirituality (Bohm,1989).

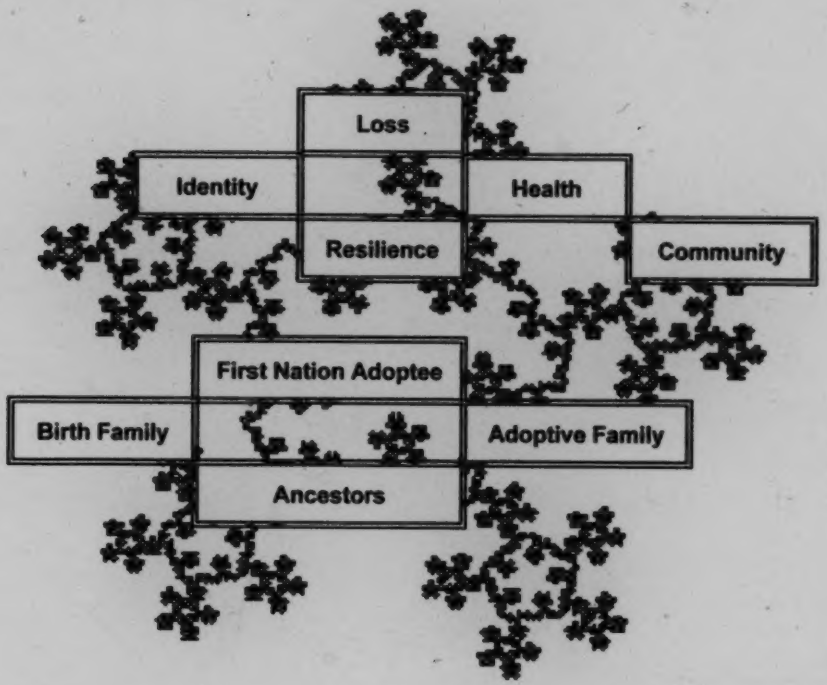
Conceptual Model: The Ecology of Connectedness and Health for First Nation Adoptees

The findings from the adoptee interviews and the talking circles provide valuable insight for developing an ecological framework of connectedness, health and First Nation adoptees. While the conceptual models previously discussed in Chapter Four reflect a cyclical and circular form, another appropriate form, based on the graphic features of *fractal* design, emerged as I reflected on the categories and linkages in the adoptees' lives (Tables 4.4 and 4.5). Jones (1999) shares this comment about fractal design:

> Simply put, (fractals) are shapes which show similar features at different sizes – much of what goes into fractals is based on mathematics. Sometimes the math is complicated, sometimes it isn't. But you *do not* need to know or understand the mathematics behind the art to appreciate it. (p. 1)

Figure 5.1

The Ecology of Connectedness and Health for First Nation Adoptees



Fractal design is an automaton designed by A. Lindenmayer in 1968 to model cell development. The cells are represented by strings of symbols that, in theory, begin with one cell at birth which automatically begins to develop, reproduce and multiply. However, these cells never lose the linkage to that first cell, which, if one examines the graphic closely, cannot be isolated. The distortion of the *first cell* is supported by the principles of quantum physics whereby we are all connected and remain connected through eternity.

David Bohm, a physicist, devoted his life to experimenting and writing about quantum interconnectedness. He (1989) proposed a revolutionary quantum theory,

observing an *implicate order of the universe*. He applied this theory to animate and inanimate matter, such as electrons and plasma. Pratt (1993) explains Bohm's view of the universe: "In Bohm's view, all the separate objects, entities, structures and events in the visible or explicate world around us are relatively autonomous, stable and temporary 'subtotalities' derived from a deeper, implicate order of unbroken wholeness" (p.3). Pratt further explores Bohm's ideas:

> There is a photo intelligence in matter, so that the new evolutionary developments do not emerge at random fashion but creatively as relatively integrated wholes from implicate levels of reality. The mystical connotations of Bohm's ideas are underlined by his remark that the implicate domain could equally be called Idealism, Spirit, Consciousness. The separation of the two – matter and spirit – is an abstraction. The ground is always one. (p.271)

Bohm's philosophy and teachings have influenced this present study, in particular the design of Figure 5.1 and the rationale for understanding adoption and First Nation people. Based on Bohm's theory, the First Nation adoptee can be placed in a context where a connection exists at birth to her or his birth family, community and ancestors. These connections are shadowed through adoption into another family, culture and community, but the linkages to the birth family, community and ancestors remain, as explained through the principle of quantum physics.

An adoptee's sense of disconnection stems from an intrinsic sense that the environment in which he/she has developed has been altered through adoption. Adoption has created a different environment than initially intended by creation. In turn, this intrinsic sense causes a spiritual dissonance that has an impact on health, which is connected to issues of loss. This spiritual dissonance can explain why an adoptee retains a permeating sense of loss despite a relatively nurturing adoptive home environment or a fairly positive and healthy lifestyle. Moreover, if one continues to follow Bohm's

arguments and recognizes that we are all related, it may be that in order to optimize a change in environment, certain factors need to be considered.

Human Ecology

Environmental factors can influence the direction of policies and practice for adoption and First Nation children. For instance, the adoptive family is part of an adoptee's ecological context in which resilience may be nurtured. This is consistent with the human ecological theoretical framework that has been used to explore other areas of child and adolescent development that inform this study.

Sontag (1996) describes some of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) work that advanced Human Ecological theory. Bronfenbrenner proposed that the environment influences patterns of behavior or perception as representative of developmental change in human beings. Interaction refers to the exchanges between an active human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment, which become progressively more complex and are reciprocal in nature. Bronfenbrenner suggested that the properties of the environment that have the most power to influence the course of development in the individual are those that have the most meaning to the person in a given situation. Sontag proposes that Bronfenbrenner's model is particularly useful in developing educational programs and support services for children with special needs as their family and school relationships are instrumental in guiding their development.

Henry (1993) used human ecological theory to explore adolescent suicide. She states that a human ecological approach:

> Provides a multidisciplinary approach to understanding adolescent suicide that incorporates individual, environmental (e.g., family), and social system factors that may be related to suicidal behaviors. The human ecological approach to suicidal adolescents and their families integrates previous research and theory into

> the model. It focuses on the different ecosystemic levels (i.e., organism, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem), and identifies predictors of suicide, as well as intervention and prevention, at each level. In conclusion, the human ecological model seems to hold considerable potential for conducting research and public policy analysis relating to suicidal adolescents and their families. (1993)

From an Aboriginal worldview, the levels of connection in the environment include connection to the ancestors and the land as well as the cultural and spiritual strength of these two factors. While this conceptualization may be difficult for some people to understand, especially those individuals who advocate for the adoption of Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal homes, I am reminded of a teaching which an Elder passed on to me and other participants at a mental health forum:

> It is important to believe what other people believe, but it is important to know what they believe – everyone's reality differs. (Blackwater, personal communication)

An ecological perspective for First Nation adoption can assist to identify predictors of success for adoption to be a helpful process for First Nation children. This can be accomplished by using a model as described above in the suicide intervention study and conducting adoption research using a systemic, integrative approach.

Theory of Loss for First Nation Adoptees

An adoptee's permeating sense of loss demonstrates what I describe as a spiritual loss in an ecological context that may appear on the surface as a socially connected and healthy environment. The broken connection to one's ancestors, birth family and land of origin creates a profound sense of loss for First Nation adoptees, who descend from a tribal background where natural laws of interconnection prevail. Based on the research results, an answer to the main research question for this study, *How does connectedness influence the health of First Nation adoptees?* was proposed. This theory of loss for First

Nation adoptees states that: *Without connection to birth family and community, First Nation adoptees experience loss which is manifested through impaired physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.*

It is important to acknowledge that not all adoptees in this study were adopted in non-Aboriginal families. Three participants were adopted in First Nation adoptive families. What is interesting is that they acknowledged that this experience provided them with a connection to cultural information and experiences, however, feelings of disconnection remained as they experienced loss of names, family members, health information, siblings, language and ancestral ties and knowledge. In other words, their identity was not intact due to broken ties with their birth family and community of origin. Therefore, loss remained an issue for them.

The research results indicate that an adoptee's lack of connectedness to his/her *tribal self* has an impact on the health of First Nation adoptees, particularly when being placed in non First Nation adoptive homes. Findings indicate that adoptees placed in Aboriginal homes felt a stronger connection to their tribal self although it wasn't due to specific efforts from their adoptive parents. It simply enhanced their feelings of belonging as expressed by Carissa, Christina and Carla, in particular.

Findings from Other Studies

There are two prominent studies that have addressed some of these concepts previously. As mentioned in the Literature Review, Fanshel (1972) concluded that Aboriginal children placed in White adoptive homes experienced some problems particularly around racism during adolescence. Bagley et.al. (1993) concluded that

Aboriginal children placed in non Aboriginal homes are not likely to have successful adoption.

Over a decade later, this study examines the relationship between connectedness and health for First Nation adoptees. Results indicate there are a number of losses for First Nation adoptees when disconnected from their cultural birth family and community. Identity was described as the major loss in this study. Another finding was that most of the adoptees in this study experienced some health problems which they attributed to their disconnection from their identity. What has been described in the findings section will now be explored in more detail here by linking the findings with existing literature on adoption and First Nation children.

Key Findings and Themes from the Relevant Literature on Adoption

In this section the themes in the adoption literature that are relevant to this study are reviewed to examine how key findings relate to this body of literature. In other words: Do the findings support the literature or do they refute concepts within the literature?

Key Finding: Connectedness

There is minimal literature on connectedness and adoption of First Nation children even though there is growing awareness about the significance of this issue. For example, one participant in Talking Circle One observed:

> I think as First Nation people we understand connectedness and how important it is. (C1)

Adoptees in this study also spoke about their connection to the land or the reserve from which they came. This type of attachment is consistent with McCormick's (1997) discussion about the spiritual bonding that occurs with nature. For example, Paris

explained how she returns to her mother's community and the land that her ancestors held to seek peace and a sense of balance. She described a place where she feels whole:

> I have a camp that was given to me by my uncle – my mom's brother – that's on our traditional hunting ground. So, I have a strong connection with that. And that's my serenity for thought, that's the place where I go to meditate. I can be and feel safe. (Paris)

This is consistent with findings from kinship studies where it was found that kinship, in an indigenous paradigm, includes plants, animals, and relationship with the land (Henderson, 2000; Red Horse, Martinez, Day, Day Poupart, & Scharnberg, 2000).

Other adoptees spoke of the grounding that spirituality has provided them, helping them feel connected to the universe and giving them a sense of importance:

> There has to be some sort of rediscovering of your culture. I mean, I've had mystical, bizarre things happen to me, and I have no idea why. I've been in pipe ceremonies. I've been in pow-wows. I've been in smudging ceremonies. I know what's going to happen next. How do I know? I don't how I know. I just know. It's an ingrained thing. (Rose)

> Every teaching that is in your system, they are there for a reason. And, I believe that if the Creator God wants you to change, to go to a different system like that He will let you know – just ask and say, "Hey God." Just lay down that tobacco, say a short little prayer – ask for help. (Buzz)

These feelings of importance are what adoption scholars have described as the key tenet of connectedness (Boss, 1999; Borders, Penny and Portnoy, 2000; Brodzinski and Schecter, 1990; Hendry and Reid, 2000; Resnick, Harris and Blum, 1993; Schecter and Reid, 2000).

Lee, Lee and Draper's (2001) work, which examines the relation between well-being and connectedness, has the most relevance for this present study. Lee et al. found that people experiencing a lack of connectedness often experience loneliness, anxiety, jealousy, anger, depression and low self-esteem among other negative emotions.

In summary, this study indicates that connection to tribal lands can enhance feelings of connectedness. This is consistent with the view of many indigenous scholars (Bastien, 2004; Cajete, 2000; Peat, 1994) and provides some insights in how adoption practice can lend itself to keeping ties for First Nation adoptees to a kinship system which includes their community of origin.

Key Finding: Health

The adoptees in this study described health conditions which were physical, mental and spiritual in nature. For example, five adoptees experienced anxiety attacks at some point in their lives. Six adoptees described the intense anger they felt and five adoptees had been diagnosed with depression. The adoptees in this study also noted some high risk behavior including running away and suicidal behavior. Some had feelings of detachment, confusion and various fears, such as fear of attachment and of close relationships.

In her work with immigrant children, Boss (1999) examines psychosomatic illnesses related to a lack of connectedness. She explains that these illnesses often are a result of *frozen grief*. In other words, a person experiences loss from being separated from her or his family of origin. She further observes that the family in people's minds is typically more important than the family they actually live with. Boss's findings seem to parallel the situation with adoptees. For example, talking circle participants in this study spoke about the *fantasy families* that children in care often create and how the children are typically disappointed when they finally meet their families. According to Boss, some of the physical reactions to this loss are backaches, stomach ailments, headaches, anxiety

and depression. In this study, three of the adoptees in this study reported having back problems and stomach ailments.

In additional support of Boss's (1999) work, this study reveals some significant findings regarding connectedness and health and offers a contribution to the literature on adoption as well as the literature on social determinants of health and health-related disciplines, such as mental health. As discussed in Table 4.3 in Chapter Four, adoptees in this study reported a number of health problems. For the adoptees, being First Nation already places them in a societal position where they are part of a marginalized population. In the literature, some researchers refer to this position as being *socially excluded* and explain that these individuals are typically "vulnerable to the health-threatening effects of these deteriorating conditions" (Raphael, 2004, p.364). Warry (1998) describes this further with some conclusions from his work in the field of Aboriginal mental health:

> It became clear that loss of individual mental well-being was intimately connected with negative life experiences that occur over long periods of time, and that surface in times of major crisis in communities. In every community, there are a number of people who are in deep pain. The vitality of Aboriginal communities seems to be constantly threatened by the *potential* for crises, as deeply buried problems surface or temporarily disable individuals or networks of kin. (p. 137)

These authors place individual issues within a community context for Aboriginal people. Trocme, Knoke and Blackstock (2004) conducted a study which examined the conditions of Aboriginal children in Canada's child welfare system. They support Warry's conclusions and state that, "in order to correct the effects of an Aboriginal history of colonization and the forced removal of children, a comprehensive set of measures must address the social problems that these communities inherit" (Trocme, Knoke and Blackstock, 2004, p. 596).

Both the adoptees and the circle members in this study spoke of the significant impact of various losses for First Nation adoptees. The loss of language, identity and status were identified as the major losses related to adoption. However, this loss must be framed within the context of being Aboriginal in Canada today. Based on the findings from this study, it appears that the impact of adoption adds yet another layer of grief and loss to a pre-existing condition based on racial background. The significance of this pre-existing condition must not be minimized and will be discussed further in the recommendations for practice section as it pertains to policy.

This type of policy will create some inroads into addressing issues of adoption from a structural and holistic perspective as suggested by adoptees in this study. The emotional and mental damage experienced by some of the adoptees was dealt with in a variety of ways and not necessarily through access of formal services provided specifically for adoption-related issues in health systems. Some adoptees used interventions, such as therapists, peer counseling strategies and traditional healers.

In Chapter Four, Table 4.6 illustrates a variety of health conditions experienced by adoptees, based on a holistic perspective. A holistic wellness model, which addresses mental, spiritual, emotional and physical health, appears to be an appropriate approach to reverse these health conditions. Health issues for the adoptees in this study also are related to family issues within their adoptive and birth families. For example how is physical and sexual abuse trauma situated in the adoption experience? Adoption is not a causal factor in these situations, however these issues become part of an overall health context for adoptees who experienced abuse.

Key Finding: The Issue of Abandonment from a First Nation Perspective

One of the major issues described in the literature on adoption is that of abandonment (Carlini, 1993; Connolly, 2000; Verrier, 1994) and in particular, the trauma associated with separation from birth mothers. More recently, Coles (2004), a birth father who advocates for equal gender analysis in adoption literature, emphasizes:

> Birth fathers are not adequately represented in the traditional adoption models, particularly the 'Adoption Triangle' where they are regarded, if at all, as an appendage. (p.81)

Coles maintains that adoptees may feel another form of abandonment from birth fathers who take a secondary place to the birth mother in search and reunion.

Adoptees in this study experienced abandonment in a variety of ways. For instance, one of the most frequently asked questions by adoptees of their birth mothers is: "Why did you give me away?" For Jane, this was the first question she wanted to ask her birth mother. However, her efforts were thwarted because of language difficulties, leaving her to feel incredibly angry:

> Then after those feelings wore off and the feelings of anger came, I couldn't be in the same room as her. (Jane)

Other adoptees spoke of similar anger toward their birth parents. This anger appeared to stem from feelings of abandonment that resulted from questions that remained unresolved even after a meeting with birth parents. In particular, some adoptees revealed that one of the expectations from a meeting with birth parents is an explanation or rationale for being placed for adoption. In the adoption literature this desire is described as one of the major hopes of reunions. When this information was not provided or the matter was not acknowledged, the adoptees in this study experienced a deep sense

of resentment. Sierra revealed that when her birth mother merely sat there and looked at her, she indicated that "it wasn't really the meeting that I had expected" (Sierra).

For some adoptees, this sense of abandonment is echoed in the language they use to describe their situation. For example, some adoptees describe their adoption experience as having been "given up". Carissa explains:

> Now, the three of us, we were given up by my mom. (Carissa)

This study in comparison to Coles's (2004) and Menard's (1997) work reveals some interesting findings. Of the adoptees in this study who met their birth parents, many typically met their birth mother first, an experience similarly found in Coles's and Menard's research. However, unlike Coles's assertion, several adoptees in this study (11 of the total 18 adoptees) did search for or demonstrated a great interest in their birth fathers. For example, Billy, who had received information about his father through a search of his father's occupational background, describes his wish to meet his birth father. Billy already had conducted research into his Scottish roots by exploring his father's tartan and had acquired a pin for when he eventually could afford to own a tartan. At the time of the interview, Billy had a name and a contact address, but was somewhat hesitant to initiate contact, explaining:

> I haven't done anything because I figure I've got more siblings out there, I don't know, I don't know if he'll…I'm not sure if I'll get someone else to call for me. Do I call myself? I don't know. I really don't feel like being rejected. And, if I don't call then I won't be rejected, but I'll also never know. (Billy)

Billy's experience demonstrates that the longing for identity may not be limited to First Nation identity and that search for birth fathers was a finding in this study that contradicts some notions in adoption literature that the birth mother is the central figure.

Additionally, Mama Bear has persevered to find her father. She rode a bus from Ontario to British Columbia to find him, but seemed to narrowly miss meeting him several times:

> I talked to some people in (community). When I got there, this native guy says, "I know who you're talking about, but he moved away to (community) years ago." So, I ended up in (community). (laughs) Greyhound takes you to a lot of places! Then I was talking to some other people, and I said, "Do you know this guy?" They guided me to some hotel, like, at 12 o'clock at night, and there's people shooting needles in their arms over there and stuff on the sidewalk and I'm, like, "What am I doing here?" So, I went up to this old native guy, and I asked him if he knew (name) and he said yes – Here's my phone number and I ended up in (community) and then said, "I'm going back there." He said he's gone fishing or something. He went for a little trip. I said, "I'm going back home and I'll come back later." (laughs). (Mama Bear)

These experiences clearly demonstrate Mama Bear's longing to be connected to her birth father and not just her birth mother. Yet, this study also found, similar to Coles's (2004) study, that there is limited information shared about birth fathers. For example, Donna expresses her frustration with the lack of information from her birth mother about her birth father:

> I don't even think (name) could say who the father is. He could be Aboriginal, but who's to say where he is or what his name is, you know. Like, she was young and from what I under…you know, from what I take, it sounds like a one nightstand to the point where she doesn't know. (Donna)

In comparison to the existing literature on abandonment, this study uniquely finds that adoptees also experience feelings of abandonment related to their siblings, extended family and community. Moreover, these feelings co-exist with further experiences of loss associated with language, culture and identity. These experiences, a key finding of this study, were particularly evident following an adoptee's reunion with siblings or extended family that did not maintain contact or seemed uninterested in pursuing a relationship with the adoptee. This type of experience creates a deep sense of abandonment for the

adoptee, a pain quite distinct from the abandonment associated with birth parents. For example, Arthur has not spoken to his only sister in ten years even though they were adopted into the same home. Similarly, Marty describes how his sister does not want contact with him or his brother:

> And then finding out that our mom, like, lived downtown east side probably pushed her away – my brother didn't help either 'cause he was, I mean…it drove him so much…so much that I had to slow him down when we met – and I think that maybe she didn't speak, like, she didn't say that, like, she gave in – they were suppose to meet a couple of times – and she never showed up. I've never heard from her. I wrote her a letter just to see if, you know, just to give her time – just to let her know that she has another brother out there. If she ever wanted to get in touch with me, she could. (Marty)

All the adoptees in this study had lost touch with some siblings or extended family after a reunion. Angel shares the hurt this experience has caused in her life:

> Here I'm supposed to be their family, and here I'm supposed to be loved by them but, you know, it made me feel like I was nothing. (Angel)

Donna likewise reveals:

> I've always known that I had other siblings out there, so having a relationship with one of them and getting along, you know, it feels…it feels, like, I don't feel that they accept me as part of the family. (Donna, personal communication)

Interestingly, these feelings parallel my own experiences as an adoptee. Early in my research journey, I wrote about how my meeting with my birth sister created a sense of belonging for the first time in my life (Carriere, 1999).

Key Finding: Attachment

The experiences of the participants in this study, both the adoptees and circle members who participated in the talking circles, reinforce and support the need for a broader view of attachment as put forth by De Aguayo (1995), McCormick (1997), and Richard (2004). While some of the adoptees, such as Billy, Carla, Christina, Mama Bear,

Molly, Sarah, and Sierra, tended to focus on positive relationships with adoptive parents, all participants also spoke about the significance of broader relationships and the importance of discovering extended family, siblings and community linkages. In fact, these relationships appear to outweigh the necessity to be attached to one or two birth parents as proposed in attachment theory as proposed by Bowlby (1969). For example, before beginning their search, adoptees in this study had some knowledge of belonging to another family and a First Nation community, which seemed to be a driving force for their re-connection. Following a reunion, some adoptees found that this connection was an important factor for remaining connected to their birth families. Moreover, for other adoptees, this connection was an important factor for remaining connected to both their adoptive and birth families. These adoptee experiences are consistent with Richard's (2004) assertion that viewing the non-Aboriginal adoptive parent figure as the only source of attachment is inaccurate and inconsistent with a First Nation perspective. The key informants in this study also support this view and propose that new theories on attachment be developed from a First Nation perspective. For example, C1 notes:

> The other hard time that I really have is that the system relies on other professionals, and I have a real hard time with attachment theory because it's not from a First Nation perspective. (C1)

Key Finding: Identity

Silverstein and Kaplan Roszia (2003) observe that a lack of identity "may lead adoptees, particularly in adolescent years to seek out ways to belong in more extreme fashion than many of their non-adopted peers" (p. 28). Yet, there continues to be a need for research that examines the issue of identity in adoption. As Friedlander (1999) in his

study of identity as a factor in cross-cultural adoption notes, there are gaps in the literature regarding identity and psychological well-being.

Fulcher (2002) emphasizes the importance of maintaining *cultural safety* in adoption practices or, in other words, attending to a child's *cultural frame of reference* (p. 689). This cultural safety is a significant aspect of the discussion about identity for First Nation adoptees. For example, Anderson (2000) in *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* describes her search for her identity and is an advocate of reclaiming Aboriginal traditions as part of this process. MacRae (2003), who advises non-Aboriginal adoptive parents of Aboriginal children to honor their children's identity by looking at themselves and their attitudes, writes:

> Become aware of how you were raised to treat or view native people. Look at how our media, our neighbors and our government treat First Nations politically and socially. Learn about the history of First Nations and adoptions by reading books such as *Stolen from Our Embrace.* Bring your child to First Nation events. Find an advocate for your child, whether a relation or not, who can help your child to participate in traditional ceremonies so that they know who they are and where they come from. (p.173)

Furthermore, the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program Evaluation (2001), which included interviews with First Nation adoptees who used the program for search and reunions, found that a majority of the adoptees interviewed indicated that they connected with the agency in order to meet their need for knowledge about their ancestry.[5] It appeared that the loss of identity was a compelling reason for them to continue their search for their birth family or information about their background.

[5] Some of the adoptees involved with the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program also participated in this present study. As such, the findings of this study tend to replicate the findings of the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program Evaluation.

In this study, identity was viewed by all 18 adoptees as the main loss that they experienced through adoption.[6] Eagle shares a personal analysis of her loss:

> They just took us, shipped us off, put us somewhere else and forgot about us; that's it. I think they should be accountable for that, because – I know there were good adoptions, and a lot of kids probably had good lives, but I would say the majority of the adoptions were – and foster home placements were not so good. I hear so many stories of things that happened. I hear very few success stories. You know what I mean? I always hear adoptees saying how lost they felt and how disconnected and "Who am I? Who are my people?" Lots of emotional instabilities, like, I put down right here, there's a lot of unrest and I think – I don't know what the government was thinking, what their reason was that they felt they had the right to do this. (Eagle)

Mona believes that if she perhaps had been placed with her same cultural group, her life might have been different:

> Because if I had been adopted into an Aboriginal family…(pause)…how would you say it? I'd be the same as them I guess. (Mona)

In contrast, Christina was adopted by First Nation parents. However, she did not know about her birth family background until she began her search. Her greatest fear was that she would date someone she was related to:

> Like I said, finding out that I was adopted, the only thing it did for me was confuse certain things, that's all. The other thing I was afraid of is, "Who am I related to? Who can I go out with?" You know, "Who's my relative?" (Christina)

Similar to Christina, most of the adoptees in this study asked themselves the same questions: *Who am I?* and *Where do I come from?* According to the Society of Special Needs Adoptive Parents (2003), these questions are part of a continuum of life long issues for adopted children in general.

O'Connor (2003) identifies several adoptive parental qualities that help diminish the identity crisis for adopted children in cross-racial adoptive homes. In particular, O'Connor suggests that there is a need "for a parent who accepts and can help the child

[6] Identity is a sub-category under the core category of loss.

accept the child's racial and cultural ancestry and can comfortably share knowledge and information about the child's racial and cultural ancestry with the child" (2003, p. 153). In this study, there were examples in each of the adoptees' stories that demonstrate their hope for someone to help them reconcile their identity and to help them find the information and knowledge that would assist in this reconciliation. Yet, this wish was not always fulfilled. For example, Sierra regretfully explains how her adoptive parents felt ill-equipped to help her in her search for her cultural identity. Similarly, other adoptees echoed disappointment about the inability to address this loss of identity.

In both talking circles, key informants suggested that identity is major factor that drives First Nation adoptees to come searching in their home community. H identifies an important question that she asks adoptees and explains what she believes is the answer:

> Okay, so what piece was it that drove you all those years to…and, I believe it's the roots. (H)

For this study, it is important to note that the adoptees did not limit the discussion about identity to self and who they were, but also spoke about identity in relation to their tribal affiliations, such as their First Nation community, traditions, language and spiritual teachings. In summary, it appears that identity in First Nation adoption needs to be viewed from a broader context than self-identity. According to the findings of this study, collective identity plays an important role in First Nation adoption.

The Meeting of Two Frameworks

It was anticipated that the inclusion of *indigenous ways of knowing* in this study would enhance the field of *Human Ecology,* in light of the current need for diverse perspectives to be reflected in its application, particularly in the area of family studies. Boss et al. (1993) propose that a main source of optimism for the future is that more

scholars are joining the ranks of family theorists and that "issues of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, values, ethics, politics, religion and culture are out in the open in the family field" (p. 27). Perhaps, as scholars from various backgrounds assume this work, this diversity will be reflected in future scholarship. For example, the human ecological framework implies that environmental characteristics, such as land are important to human beings (Westney, Brabble, and Edwards, 1988). However, the importance or the extent of the relationship between tribal people and land is not properly emphasized. For the Maori people in New Zealand, they describe their ancestry as including their rivers and mountains (Roberts and Willis, 1998). Similarly, for First Nation people in Canada, the relationship to land is essential. In particular, O'Neil, Lemchuk-Favel, Allard and Postl (1999) have observed a cultural relationship with land that they claim has important implications in the field of health. They believe that contact with Europeans has "undermined a complex system of ecological, social and spiritual balance...and in the process, the very survival of Aboriginal societies was threatened" (1999, p. 134). Several adoptees in this study experienced the kinship, peace and healing qualities of being on the land of their ancestors and explained how these experiences provided them with strength and a tool for recovery.

As a discipline, Human Ecology seeks to enhance people's quality of life by exploring the connection between people, their behavior and the quality of their environment (Bubolz and Sontag, 1993). This approach is closely aligned with beliefs regarding the Medicine Wheel; some First Nation people view life as a cycle in which a person strives for harmony with family and community through physical, emotional, mental and spiritual balance (Nabigon and Mawhiney, 1996). According to Nabigon and

Mawhiney (1996), the process of change depends on the interconnectedness with others and the ancestors. Within this environmental paradigm, spirituality for Aboriginal people is defined as the relationship with the Creator and is a constant element (Connors, 1993). Therefore, spirituality lies at the core of all ecological factors that impact First Nation people. Furthermore, Henderson (as cited in Battiste, 2000) explains, "Aboriginal understandings, languages, teachings and practices developed through direct interaction with the forces of the natural order or ecology" (p. 260). Ecology, in this sense, provides the context for our development as human beings. Henderson also suggests that "Aboriginal people can understand anything if they are conscious of their relationships to other life forms and the relationship of these life forms to everything else" (p. 260). As such, part of the healing resulting from being reconnected with our personal histories arises because we come to truly understand concepts and experiences from a spiritual base. Moreover, with this sense of wholeness, we can experience relationships with other life forms, perhaps, for the first time. Although many of the adoptees in this study had difficulties with their search and reunion process, it is unlikely that they would change the decisions they made. Despite some painful reunions or disappointments with birth family members, each of the adoptees spoke of a right to know and the healing qualities of knowing. This preference for knowing has significant implications for public policy in the field of adoption.

Meyer (1998) reports that we have entered into a knowledge revolution where indigenous people are struggling to maintain a right to define themselves through their values and the interpretation of their world via cosmology and epistemology. He reveals that "battle casualties point to the elusive spectre of power, influence and politics and as

systems continually dismiss core beliefs of indigenous peoples, misunderstandings and antagonism grows" (1998, p. 124). Similarly, Simpson (2000) speaks of Anishinabe (Ojibwe) ways of knowing:

> A number of Aboriginal intellectuals in a variety of disciplines are calling for the recognition and employment of Aboriginal worldviews, theories of knowledge and methods indigenous to Aboriginal cultures – it seems the time has come to move one step at a time beyond the post-positivist methodology and to begin to ground our research in Aboriginal paradigms, to use Aboriginal methods. (p. 165)

There is an increasing awareness in non-indigenous circles that other ways of knowing exist and should not be ruled out in research for the development of healing work with Aboriginal people. However, in order to discover these healing strategies, it is important to connect research to practice. If one uses an indigenous or Aboriginal approach in research, such as talking circles or the use of dreams (Alberta Health and Wellness, 2004) then one needs to honor these approaches by proposing policy and practice models that follow Aboriginal ways of being. In other words, an Aboriginal epistemology needs to be incorporated into social policy that affects Aboriginal people. For example, this study focuses on the adoption of First Nation children. The adoptees in this study shared their stories with me as a means of contributing to change in adoption policy for First Nation children. Key informants, such as Elders, sat in ceremony with me and others to pray for this research and the participants in the study. The Elders, staff members and Board Members sat in talking circles and gave me permission to use what was said in these circles to advance from a First Nation perspective policy and practice for adoption. For example, one of the recommendations from Talking Circle Two was a need to advance a First Nation theory on attachment.

In effect, I have been discussing a theory on spiritual loss. Often, this is difficult to explain in Western terms without being branded as strange or *New Age*. However, I am not the first indigenous scholar who has faced these criticisms; it is human nature to criticize that which we do not understand. These critiques remind me of Larry Dossey's work from the 1980s. Larry Dossey, a physician of internal medicine who is not Aboriginal, has written several books about his observations of the spiritual self during his medical practice. In the introduction to a chapter in one of his books, he opens with a quote by Martin Buber: "All suffering prepares the soul for vision" (as cited in Dossey, 1985, p.17). Dossey proceeds to describe how a patient had a spiritual experience or vision prior to surgery. While her doctors dismissed her vision, Dossey notes:

> Sarah now knew that the world worked differently than anyone supposed, that there were principles operating beyond the common view. No matter how poorly these ideas and her experience fit her previous model of reality, she could not dismiss them. (1985, p. 19)

Within an indigenous framework, loss affects our whole being, including mind, body and spirit. The adoptees and talking circle participants spoke of losses in these holistic terms.

Earlier in this study, I had indicated that the main research question is: *How does connectedness influence the health of First Nation adoptees?* Smith (1999) explains that connectedness "positions individuals in sets of relationships with other people and with the environment" (p.148). However, the findings of this study suggest that the lack of connectedness to birth family, community and the ancestors creates a persistent spiritual void that is manifested in health problems affecting the whole person. When adoptees in this study shared feelings of not belonging, confusion and a sense that something was

missing, they were describing what indigenous scientists would attribute to a spiritual void.

The Elders have suggested that ceremony and prayer will help in the process of recovery for these adoptees. Prayer and ceremony can assist to reconcile their fragmented lives and regain balance of mind, body and spirit. Peat (1994), a theoretical physicist, describes the impact of ceremonial life:

> As these ceremonies metamorphose one into the other, so too, do they lead us into a profoundly different reality from that we encounter in our everyday Western world. To enter into this domain is to question what we mean by space and time, by the distinctions between the living and the nonliving by the individual and society, by dreams and visions, by perception and reality, by causality and synchronicity, by time and eternity. (p.4)

In other words, there are answers in prayer and ceremony that can assist a person to move beyond a painful experience, placing it into perspective. In particular, for Aboriginal people, it is a means to re-interpret reality and to reconnect to the Universe while walking in balance in the Western world.

The Provincial Health Council of Alberta (1998), working with Aboriginal people, completed a task force report on health topics in order to gage the performance of the health system for Aboriginal people. The Report revealed that several individuals "spoke powerfully of the impact of personal and collective grief on many of the health issues for Aboriginal persons – loss of culture and language, status identity and respect all underlie the experience of being Aboriginal over the last few generations"(p. 21). This is consistent with findings in this study where loss was also discussed in terms of language, culture and identity.

Similarly, the University of Ottawa Institute of the Environment (2001) observes that "native people have always seen disease as an outcome of social, cultural, spiritual

and physical dysfunction" (p. 1.1) and that the spiritual domain is "the highest in the hierarchy, however, spirituality manifests itself in all other aspects of human beings" (p. 1.5). And finally, Duran and Duran (1995) found that the need for healing in Aboriginal communities can be explained by the fact that "the client/community has lost the ability to be in harmony with the life process of which the client/community is part" (p. 15). The connection of this literature to the findings of this study is that the main category of loss can be described as a spiritual loss and that spiritual loss is connected to all components of the whole person. This in turn affects their relationships with family, community and the world at large from both an indigenous and human ecological perspective.

McCormick (2001) maintains that the role of healing in traditional Aboriginal communities is not only to reaffirm cultural values, but also to consider the "individual within the context of the community" (p.17). Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996) examine healing in Aboriginal communities and propose that interconnectedness with others and the ancestors is a means to achieve wellness from a holistic perspective. Yet, Spears (2003) describes her experience in connecting to her community as nothing less than painful:

> It can be very humiliating to be a Native adoptee within our community. Community members act as though our return to our community will solve all our problems. They think we should leave our childhood histories in the past and focus on behaving like "real" Native people. After being constructed all our lives as "the problem" we return to our communities to face more of the same treatment. As recently as last year, a Native friend told me that she thinks I am brighter than most adoptees and that's why I can understand our culture. That bigotry suggests that adoption equals stupidity. It seems unthinkable, but it exists. (p. 90)

Spears's experience confirms that there is a need for the healing within the circle of adoption in First Nation communities to include responses from First Nation

communities. Interconnectedness and healing are honorable theories and practices, but adoptees and their communities need assistance in this process.

The proposed theories of Aboriginal healing discussed above suggest that the value of connectedness for First Nation adoptees lies in its ability to mitigate potential health problems, especially from a holistic perspective. For example, as Smith (1999) notes, "connecting is related to issues of identity and place, to spiritual relationships and community well-being" (p. 149). Accordingly, connectedness can contribute to the overall improved health status of Aboriginal people in Canada and around the world. Yet, connectedness, adoption and First Nations health have received little attention in the literature to date. This study reflects that connectedness and health are related and play an important role in developing best practices for First Nation adoption.

I believe that the greatest gift received from the adoptees and talking circle participants in this study were the stories that they so generously shared with us. By connecting to their pain, their triumphs and the reality of their experiences, they gained some perspective and gave some perspective. Our stories and metaphors give us the strength to face our reality and to pass this strength and vision on to others who may be suffering in silence. As such, I believe these stories are one of the major contributions of this study. In the words of members of the Alkali Lake First Nation in the early nineties: *The honor of one is the honor of all.*

CHAPTER 6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Summary of Participant Recommendations

In order to reflect upon further recommendations as part of my objectives for this study, it is important to consider the recommendations provided by participants and circle members who participated. I have elaborated on those recommendations through my analysis of findings and support from the literature. The chapter concludes with some *Implications* and a section *on Limitations.*

I developed the following recommendations while contemplating the stories, dreams and hopes of all the participants who contributed to this study. I also reflected upon practice issues for First Nation adoption in Alberta, the current adoption policy for Alberta and what the literature recommends as best practices.

Recommendations for the Development and Delivery of First Nation Adoption Programs

1. Open and Customary Adoption Programs across Canada

Throughout this study, all the participants, both the adoptees and key informants, discussed the importance of openness in adoption practices. Openness could prevent the secrecy and hidden information that was discussed at length by the adoptees as one of their major barriers to their search. This secrecy and lack of information created undue stress about personal health information and not knowing possible relatives.

Furthermore, while some provinces in Canada, including Alberta, boast of having open adoption programs (Alberta Child Welfare Act, 2000; Ontario Child and Family Services Act, 2002), these programs continue to be developed and implemented under

provincial legislation based on a non-First Nation perspective. Open adoption programs for First Nation children must be redefined based on an indigenous paradigm that is anchored in the reality of delivering child and family services both on and off reserve. A case in point is the recently publicized court hearing for five First Nation children in Saskatchewan that challenged the provincial policy on First Nation adoption. Saskatchewan's policy, similar to Alberta's *Policy Directive in the Adoption of First Nation Children*, prevents First Nation children from being adopted without consent from the child's First Nation. In this case, the Court of Queen's Bench judge refuted the First Nation agency's claim that it had the authority to "speak for the children" and ruled that there is no constitutional basis or Aboriginal rights related to equality, liberty and security in this matter (Province of Saskatchewan Queen's Bench Family Law Division 503, 2004, p. 28). This legal precedent marks yet another instance where the right to culture and birth family connection are highlighted in a judicial process in which an individual judge makes a decision based on what he/she perceives as the lack of evidence to support an alternative decision. I would suggest that this study may have given her additional considerations for this matter. Without doubt, this case will be appealed. The disturbing irony in this situation is that the focus is being misdirected. First Nation rights are being discredited while the same child welfare practices, such as poor matching and support, and the resulting untenable foster care drift for these children, are being ignored.

As well, customary adoption practices need to be revived in First Nation communities with adequate financial support (Alberta Children's Services, 2000; D'Aguayo, 1995; YTSA, 2001). Although customary adoption is a traditional extended family value and practice for First Nations, the reality of poverty and the shortage of

resources in extended family networks should not be insurmountable barriers. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) must stop patronizing First Nation Child and Family Services by proposing that they develop adoption programs on menial budget allocations.

2. Financial Support for First Nation Adoption Programs

The recommendation for First Nation adoptive homes also requires adequate financial support (Rechner, 2001; Trocme, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004) for First Nation adoption programs. INAC's financial allocations for adoption must be reviewed by a Standing Committee on First Nation adoption comprised of First Nation Child and Family Services National Directors and representatives from the Assembly of First Nations (AFN). The Standing Committee could make recommendations based on research and statistics regarding the social costs of adoption breakdown compared to the benefits of financial support in the area of adoption to First Nation agencies. As well, child and family services on and off reserve should include adoption services instead of being limited to child protection services.

3. Adoption Registries

Some of the participants in this study discussed problems and experiences with adoption registries. Adoption registries should be revised to address the enormous demand for First Nation "friendly" adoption registries. This type of registry would clearly identify a child's First Nation ancestry and be expanded to include extended family members. Also, registry staff should receive training in working with First Nation communities to provide the type of counsel required for First Nation adoptees pursuing a search.

3.1 Veto

Veto issues related to registries need to be revised based on consultation with First Nation communities. The issue of treaty and collective rights need to be considered in developing policies around veto issues.

4. Adoption Social Work Practice

Adoption workers need to begin adoption work with a consultation session with the child's First Nation community through delegated child protection workers or others who represent the interests of the leadership and community. Mirwaldt (2004) discusses the high number of Aboriginal children needing permanent care; "meaningful case consultation with the Aboriginal community is stressed as being fundamental to good permanency planning practice" (p. 18).

4.1 Relinquishment Counseling

Participants recommended the need for counseling for their birth family members. This would include relinquishment counseling for both birth parents to ensure that adoption is the best choice. It also includes some encouragement to birth parents to provide as much information about each of the birth parent's family and health histories. Any information about extended family and community of origin also should be collected at this time. For birth parents, there also is a need to ensure that relinquishment is truly the option of choice. A study focusing on young mothers involved with the BC child welfare system reports that, "In BC today, as has been true throughout the last century, those who are most likely to lose their children are poor, young, Aboriginal and come from families that have

historical involvement with child welfare" (Rutman, Strega, Callahan & Dominelli, 2001, p. 6). Relinquishment counseling requires further study, but it is relevant for adoptees and birth parents due to life-long implications for those involved.

4.2 Photos

A number of participants mentioned that photos of birth families are precious. Photos of birth parents, siblings and/or extended family members should be saved for the adoptee. Photos of the adoptee saved in a resource, such as a *Life Book*, would be a valuable source of information and comfort to facilitate a future reunion for both adoptees and birth families. Adoptees in this study described the importance of 'looking like someone' for example. Life books can take the form of scrapbooks or collections of photos and history which can enhance connectedness for adopted children (Fulcher, 2002; Society of Special Needs Adoptive Parents, 2003).

4.3 Information on Birth Fathers

As discussed in this study by some participants, knowledge and information about birth fathers is critical for adoptees because it essentially is the other half of the parental equation (Coles, 2004; Menard, 1997). It is imperative that birth mothers provide this information to the best of their knowledge and that it becomes part of the relinquishing file documentation. This information can be a legislated requirement, but will require further consideration in light of privacy legislation.

4.4 Registration for Indian Status

Registration for Indian Status requires birth parents *and* adoptive parents to ensure that children, who are eligible, are registered as Status Indians at the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada registry. In order to preserve a child's treaty rights as a First Nation person, adoption workers need to be diligent about identifying First Nation children who are placed for adoption. Some participants in this study described some difficulties in being registered.

4.5 Training for Adoptive Parents and Adoption Workers

Some participants in the study suggested that training might have assisted their adoptive parents to understand their background and culture. Training for adoptive parents and adoption workers should involve the development of a module that explains the rights of a First Nation child, shares historical information, and identifies resources where additional information can be obtained (Society of Special Needs Adoptive Parents, 2003). As well, a First Nation person should deliver this module. Additionally, research and training regarding culturally competent adoptive care of First Nation children is of great importance. Some of the adoptees in this study suggested that this training be included as part of the services provided to adoptive parents. In particular, non-First Nation adoptive families need information about the child's home community, language and history. While sharing this information may be difficult in closed adoptions because of stringent confidentiality rules, adoption

legislation and policies must address this issue. Adoption workers also need to be trained to be culturally competent in working with Aboriginal children and families. For example, some of the adoptees in this study were not sure which tribal background they were from so they assumed a tribal ancestry which was inaccurate. They suggested that training for adoptive parents might have alleviated this.

5. Cultural Plans

Cultural plans should be mandatory for First Nation children. These plans contain provisions to maintain contact with the child's First Nation community and culture and are signed by both the adoptive parents and representatives of the child's First Nation community. This practice should be mandatory in the adoption of all First Nation children (Fulcher, 2002).

6. Repatriation Services

First Nation agencies need to be supported in repatriation services for adult adoptees. This support should be provided through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in their funding for child and family services. This is a critical service that should be free for adoptees who wish to be reconnected to their First Nation community.

7. Counseling and Peer Support for Adoptees

If needed, First Nation adoptees should be provided with therapeutic supports and interventions to assist with loss issues connected to adoption. These interventions can range from Western approaches, such as individual counseling and peer support to traditional indigenous methods, such as ceremony and meeting with Elders. There are

resource implications for any of the approaches, and resources should be provided as part of the repatriation services for First Nations on and off reserve

8. First Nation Community Mentors

First Nation Child and Family Services Agencies (FNCFA) need to establish a resource list of community mentors for adoptees who return to their home community. The names of these individuals can be recorded at the Band Office of the child's First Nation. Mentors could provide family history and other required information to adoptees or assist in making linkages with extended family. Training for mentors should be funded and provided by FNCFAs through resources from repatriation budget allocations.

9. Health Information

Adoption files should contain family health history for both birth parents as a mandatory requirement and be provided to the adoptive parents during the adoption process. Adoptees in this study provided examples of how this lack of information impact their lives and the life of their children.

10. First Nation Adoption Legislation

FNCFAs, First Nations, provincial governments and the federal government should keep working toward First Nation Child and Family Services legislation in Canada that would contain provisions for First Nation adoption. The rationale for this recommendation has been spelled out clearly in this study – First Nation communities across Canada have jurisdiction over First Nation adoption.

Implications of this Study

Implications for Research

There is a critical need to understand the variables that can lead to positive outcomes for First Nation adoptees. Longitudinal studies, case histories and multi-disciplinary teamwork are methodological approaches that could produce valuable insights for adoption programs focused on First Nation adoption. Furthermore, in various disciplines such as Human Ecology family studies, social work and psychology, there is a need to explore the variables that lead to positive outcomes for First Nation adoptees. For this present study, adoption references were found in disciplines such as law and anthropology.

The findings of this study reveal several areas of research that require further investigation if First Nation adoption is to be better understood. Reitz (1999) points to what she describes as a 'groundswell' change in adoption practice with issues such as purpose of adoption, meaning of adoption, sealed versus accessible birth records, open adoption, transracial adoption, single or gay parent adoption and step-parent adoption (p. 328). The study also indicated the need for further research on the role of *reconnection* for adoptees. I would add further research about First Nation adoption to her list, with particular emphasis on resilience.

Resilience

The adoptees in this study demonstrated a high degree of resilience and tenacity under some adverse circumstances. For example, some adoptees experienced abuse or had addictions that were integrated with issues of loss in adoption. They survived, and many have completed higher education and established professional careers which

benefited them and their families. An important question for future research is: What gives adoptees the "courage to heal" and strive for accomplishments in their life? A study examining successful strategies could contribute to the field of adoption as well as the literature on social determinants of health based on a strengths perspective.

Theory of Attachment

It is timely, as discussed in this study, that Western theories of adoption such as attachment theory, be explored further from an indigenous framework. In particular, applying both grounded theory and an indigenous approach would be a useful method of data collection and analysis. Other Western theories, such as abandonment, or Western models, such as the adoption triad, could be re-developed by using this approach. Since the literature on adoption in Canada largely addresses the issue of First Nation adoption from a Western framework as well as a *special needs* perspective, there is a gap in the existing literature that can be filled with indigenous perspectives and theories.

Evaluation of Cultural Plans and Other Interventions

Cultural plans have been recommended in this study building on the recommendation from the Society of Special Needs Adoptive Parents in British Columbia. In order to advance adoption best practices, it is important to evaluate these types of interventions. A longitudinal study which compares the outcomes of First Nation children raised in non-Aboriginal homes with cultural plans in place could demonstrate the feasibility of this practice. If cultural plans prove to be helpful in maintaining identity and reducing risk behaviors associated with loss, this information would be useful in cross-cultural adoption policy and practice.

Open and Customary Adoption

This study points to the importance of reviving First Nation community responses to the need for adoption. Open adoption has been implemented in several provinces across Canada, but this is one approach to adoption that is not necessarily based in a First Nation worldview. It also is important to note that open adoption and open records are two different matters. Open adoption occurs when birth parents play a role in choosing the adoptive family and there may be knowledge of where the child resides with perhaps, some form of continuing contact. There are degrees of openness in this type of adoption, depending on which conditions of openness each family agrees to. In comparison, open record is a process dictated by policy or legislation. With open records, information is shared with the adoptee, birth family or adoptive family. These two notions in adoption procedures may not be applicable or culturally relevant to customary adoption practices for First Nation children.

Although customary adoption was practiced in various forms in Aboriginal communities across Canada, it is no longer realistic to expect extended families and First Nation community members to take in children out of the goodness of their hearts. My interest in this present study stemmed from the research I undertook for my thesis, *Kinship Care in Two First Nation Communities as an Alternative to Foster Care* (1995), in fulfillment of the requirements for my Master's Degree in Social Work. One of the conclusions of my thesis is that extended family care in this era requires support, including financial resources, to care for First Nation children in need of out of home placements. Currently, I propose that the same support is required for customary care in First Nation communities in the new millennium. Without doubt, there is a high degree of

poverty in First Nation and Aboriginal communities across Canada. Although economic development, higher education and other hopeful strategies are being attempted, the fact remains that in Canada, "forty-six percent of First Nation people on reserves rely on social assistance, a rate four times higher than the general Canadian population" (Chandrakant, 2004, p. 269). Since poverty is a risk factor for a number of related issues, such as disease and mortality, demographic indicators demonstrate that childcare requires financial support in First Nation communities. Durst (1999) who examined the issue of child wellness in Aboriginal communities stated that:

> Many Aboriginal communities continue to struggle with community dysfunction as they seek to overcome a long legacy of colonialism and dependency. This has left some communities with a high prevalence of substance abuse, poverty, family violence, serious tensions in the community, including tensions between men and women, and other social problems. (p. 200)

This situation creates financial strain and practice settings with inherent conflict for First Nation agencies, claims Durst (p.201), as they are caught in jurisdictional and funding dilemmas. Funding of child and family services also means funding of customary care and customary adoption in First Nation communities.

Adoption is often viewed as a replacement for the birth family where the birth family provides a *gift* to the adoptive family (Coles, 2004). Some adoptive families would disagree with this description and may perhaps view adoption as a contribution to their family, not a process where they proceeded *out of the goodness of their hearts*, an image that is often portrayed in popular myths about adoption. At times, gifts can come with a price tag attached. I am not suggesting that adoption programs change dramatically to look like foster care or kinship care programs. However, it is time for research on adoption subsidies in First Nation communities. At the very least, First Nation agencies

providing child and family services programs need support in developing customary adoption programs.

In a keynote address to the 5th Annual National First Nation Child and Family Services Conference, Littlechild (2004) highlighted the work of the *Committee on the Rights of the Child*, which has examined rights for First Nation families and communities. Littlechild (2004) explained that the Committee recommends that "parties take effective measures to safeguard the integrity of Indigenous Families and assist them in their child-rearing responsibilities" and that "maintaining the integrity of Indigenous families and communities be a consideration in development programs, social services, health and education programs affecting Indigenous children" (p. 7). Littlechild concludes that Canada needs a strong monitor, such as a federal Children's Advocate for First Nations and Métis children that reports to Parliament and is accountable to First Nation and Métis people (2004, p.9). Littlechild's recommendation is interesting and, based on the findings of this study, makes good sense in an effort to preserve the identity and rights of Aboriginal children in Canada.

Métis and Other Aboriginal Groups

Research for one Aboriginal group in Canada has implications for other Aboriginal groups. For example the issue of residential school has been explored with all Aboriginal communities and although there may be generalities, there are unique circumstances for each Aboriginal group experiencing the phenomena. This applies to the issue of adoption.

Further investigation regarding the response of Métis children to cross-cultural adoption and the engagement of the Métis community in the area of adoption is

necessary. With recent developments, such as the establishment of the Manitoba Métis Child and Family Services Authority, this study certainly can inform Métis social work practice in the area of adoption. The approach also can be explored from an Inuit perspective where "kinship has been described as the foundation of Inuit social organization and life" (Kral, 2003, p.8). Kral examines various studies in which Inuit kinship includes the practice of adoption as a social bond that extends beyond blood ties (2003, p. 8).

Gender Analysis from a First Nation Perspective

Coles (2004) is one of a few scholars who represent the male birth parent viewpoint. Accordingly, it is necessary to expand gender analysis within the research on adoption. A significant contribution could be made by expanding gender analysis to include the worldview of Aboriginal male birth parents, which are typically viewed as being absent and often are criticized or ostracized in child welfare services, including adoption work. Engaging in this type of research would mark a new era in the adoption literature and make a significant contribution to the development of Aboriginal foster care and adoption programs.

I believe we are in a period of transition with First Nation adoption. With an increase in First Nation child and family services throughout Canada and a growing demand from First Nation leadership for First Nation sovereignty, we could see the process of adoption for First Nation children changing drastically in the next decade. The controversy over the loss of identity, culture and ancestral ties for First Nation children in non First Nation adoptive homes continues. It is a time of contemplation for what

changes will best serve the interests of First Nation children within a context of family and community.

Implications for Practice

For the most part, the story of First Nation adoption remains mostly in the hearts and minds of adoptees themselves, and the body of literature is incomplete without these valuable stories. However, First Nation adoption is a sensitive subject that has presented several challenges to scholars. For example, there are legal issues related to Alberta's *Freedom of Information and Protection of Personal Privacy Act* that must be considered. Legislators view the privacy of all parties in the adoption triad as important. In fact, some adoptees do not want to speak about their experiences because it is too painful. However, scholars may overcome some of these barriers by working with local community agencies, such as the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency in this study.

As identified in the literature, there is a variety of dynamics or themes to consider in examining cross-cultural adoptions. This study considers these themes from the perspective of First Nation adoptees. First, the right and the need to have information about one's birth family and community of origin has been debated vigorously in the literature on First Nation adoption (Alberta Children's Services, 2000; Alberta Family and Social Services, 1986; Fournier and Crey, 1998; Johnston, 1983; Kimmelman, 1984; Lazarus, 1997). Yet, regardless of whether a child is adopted at birth, there is no absolute mutuality in this arrangement. For example, a First Nation child does have inherent rights and has been born from a community of people whose values may be quite different from the adoptive family. In light of the research, it is likely that a child will meet with his/her birth family or return to her relatives one day. Accordingly, the process could be made

easier for him/her if he/she had some familiarity with the history and values of his/her people. For instance, there are over 24 First Nation language groups and over 600 Bands in Canada, and in 2002, there were over 700,000 Registered Indians in Canada (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2002). A child needs to know where he/ she comes from. With the assistance of the adoptive family, he/she could learn about her background and be prepared for an eventual reunion if he/she chose to do this.

Second, adoptive parents are now obliged to take training under current adoption regulations. Alberta's training modules focus on attachment, grief, parenting, adoption dissolution, and resources (Alberta Children's Services, 1999). However, training regarding the adoption of a First Nation child is conspicuously absent. I propose that the best interests of First Nation children are part of a debate that stems from a colonial legacy. Alfred and Corntassel (2005) state that:

> Contemporary Settlers follow the mandate provided them by their imperial forefathers' colonial legacy, not by attempting to eradicate the physical signs of Indigenous peoples as human bodies, but by trying to eradicate their existence as peoples through the erasure of the histories and geographies that provide the foundation for Indigenous cultural identities and sense of self (p.2)

Societal issues of racism and poverty with health-related outcomes are priorities that need to be addressed in First Nation communities, but issues related to First Nation children are not addressed by simply implementing 'culturally relevant' programs and services.

Implications for Theory

The development of a more complete and holistic theoretical framework to support current research and practice must be investigated. Adoption programs have been based primarily on attachment and child development theories (Child Welfare League of

America, 2000) and other historical perspectives about adoption (Krichbaum, 1993). Other theories that explore the cultural and spiritual dynamics of adoption are necessary, particularly regarding identity and kinship. One of the major implications for theory derived from this study however has been the potential expansion of Human Ecology and Indigenous Science as two theoretical frameworks which blend well together in addressing issues such as First Nation adoption. In Human Ecology, the focus includes internal and external environmental influences such as psychological and physiological processes (Buboltz & Sontag, 1993; Evans, 2004; Gilligan, 1999; Westney, Brabble & Edwards, 1998). However, from an Indigenous scientific perspective this is broadened to include the influence of spirituality as an internal intuitive process (Cajete, 2000; Bastien, 2004; Couture, 2004; Hart, 2002; Youngblood Henderson, 2000). How this is described in this study by participants contributes to the advancement of Human Ecology but needs to be explored further. The contribution to Indigenous Science is that the findings of this study can be integrated in a body of literature which is fairly new in promoting Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. Indigenous scholars such as myself are struggling in western academic settings to advance this knowledge further as we know the contributions this can make to the wellness of humankind overall. An examination of the dates of the Aboriginal scholars cited above indicates that their publications are fairly recent; however, our oral teachings of these concepts are from time immemorial. Integrating traditional knowledge into an indigenous research framework is a challenge that indigenous scholars in many parts of the world have taken on. I hope that this work is a contribution to that framework.

It is difficult to capture fully the magnitude of an issue like adoption when it is placed in a socio-political context, such as the history of First Nation people in Canada. There are so many other dynamics to consider such as the ongoing impact of inter-generational trauma within a historical and political legacy for a diverse First Nation population. For some adoptees, pieces of the puzzle will always be missing. How can a study even begin to address such a considerable loss? It only is through the power of spirituality and connection to the Creator that true healing may even begin. Hopefully, the experience of sharing and connecting with their own feelings has assisted those people who participated in this study and through their generosity; their sharing can assist others who are struggling with similar issues. Some of the participants in this study spoke of the healing powers of sharing and how venues are needed for adoptees to engage in this process. From this perspective, this study has professional implications for various disciplines and personal implications for adoptees, adoptive and birth families, and First Nation communities.

Limitations

Limitations are potential restrictions related to the outcomes of a study. Field and Morse (1985) suggest that the internal validity, or the degree to which the findings represent the reality of the situation, can be threatened by two sources of subjectivity: *the researcher-as-instrument* and the quality of the respondents. In this study, I am not only a researcher, but also an adoptee. While I maintained journals and a portfolio to reduce the impact of this fact on the validity of the study, there may have been an unconscious alliance that was communicated to the participants. I can only ascertain that I used every possible mechanism to maintain an empathetic stance through the tools described above

and from my years of practice as a social worker in child and family services. In that capacity I learned to avoid conflict of interest by adhering to professionalism while being human. These skills were also valuable in this research

For most of the adoptees in this study, their adoption had taken place during childhood, and reunions had taken place some time ago, during adolescence to early adulthood. This experience may have impacted their ability to recollect exact details, affecting the validity of the findings (Montgomery, Lydon and Lloyd, 1999). The impact of media hype and recent documentaries on adoption also may have influenced their perspectives. For example, the concept of the 'sixties scoop' has been documented and talked about extensively in First Nation adoption circles.

Follow-Up to this Study

Following-up and following through on a study becomes one of the most contentious considerations for an indigenous scholar. How does an indigenous scholar follow protocol to the end of the research process without reverting to a Western framework? In other words, one of the end goals of this study is to produce a dissertation that will be worthy of a PhD. But, it also is important for me to follow the direction of the Elders, who have advised me that the way this research should end is with ceremony. As such, my plan, once I have passed my oral defense, is to proceed to arrange this ceremony with the assistance and guidance of the Elders, YTSA staff and YTSA Board Members to express my gratitude. To dance an honor dance with them, having the spirit of our ancestors in the room with us, will be an experience that I have been waiting for during the course of this study. I have been blessed and in turn, I look forward to acknowledging that privilege in a ceremonial and cultural manner.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

> For natural parents and for adopted people, it is not forgetting your past and your history that allows you to move forward with your life. Rather, it is acknowledging the past and honoring its impact that makes the present more meaningful and allows you to look to the future with confidence. (Robinson, 2000, p.57)

This experience rings true for adoptees and key informants in this study. Adoptees addressed past issues in the stories they shared, indicating that this was a positive experience. They were pleased to be able to make a contribution to the field of adoption, knowing that it would help other adoptees. Key informants also spoke about the importance of this work and the impact it may have for First Nation communities.

I reflect on my research question and the research results, now knowing that connectedness and health for First Nation adoptees are related in a significant way. There is a link between knowing who you are, where you come from and how you feel as a whole person. This connectedness has been explored and described through the voice of those who know. However, I also must mention that there were some surprising discoveries along this research journey. For example, I was disturbed by the physical and sexual abuse in some of the adoptive homes. My own experience with adoption had been different and perhaps, I also had bought into the myth that adoptive parents are carefully screened and approved so that such things could not happen frequently. As an adoptive parent myself I take my role as a temporary caregiver for the Creator's children very seriously. The frequency of such incidences in a relatively small group of adoptees from across the country caused me particular concern. So, I am left to wonder – how many others have suffered in this way?

I also was surprised by the variety of health issues that the adoptees described as being related to their adoption experiences. I had assumed that adoptees would experience some emotional disturbances, such as depression, anger, disappointment and high risk behavior; these are some of the emotional impacts that I experienced as an adoptee. However, when they were asked about health issues that they attribute to their adoption experience a variety of physical ailments, such as stomach and back problems, eating disorders and a high degree of addiction were named as well as other health issues from a more holistic perspective. My professional background is in social work, and this study has confirmed for me the importance for our discipline to work closely in inter-disciplinary teams in order to pay attention to whole health and the impact of social issues on children and adults in our care. These insights have been particularly helpful for me as a practitioner and instructor in the field of social work, and I trust that the findings also will be useful to others in the helping professions.

As mentioned earlier, some of the adoptees in this study generously shared with me additional artifacts, such as published articles about their personal stories with adoption. In particular, Eagle read to me a poem that she had written. I was touched by her words and let her know that it was beautiful. I asked her if I could include it in the study. With her permission, I would like to share it with the readers of this study. Eagle wrote it when she was 25 years old. She has title it *Unconditional Love*, and I cannot think of a better way to bring this chapter of the researcher journey to a close. Here is her gift:

Poem by Eagle

When I was a baby, they took me
away, and the change in my life was as night unto day.
They took me away from the reservation, and all was lost of my Indian nation.
They taught me to speak English and undid my braids, and said to me,
"Little girl, you've got it made."
My mother's love was conditional to me, and as I grew older, I began to see.
When I was bad, she'd put me to bed and say,
"No hugs or kisses; you were naughty today."
When I reached adolescence, things really got bad,
and everything I did made my mother mad.
I ran away often, hoping I would find someone or
something to give me peace of mind.
More than 25 years have now passed away;
is the little girl lost inside of me this day?
I've built up a wall which is stronger than steel,
but it's there to keep out the pain that I feel.
I'm searching for you, and I'll look everywhere.
I hope you're the person who really does care.
It's hard to believe that what they say is true,
but I'll never know 'till I hear it from you.
I believe that your love can set my heart free.
I want to be loved unconditionally.

Personal Epilogue - My Journey of Connectedness

The following is an excerpt from my portfolio:

On Sunday, July 18, 2004 my sister and I took a short trip to visit both the communities we grew up in. This sister, as you guessed, is one of my birth siblings. She is the one who came to find me when I was 12 and who shocked my adoptive parents by showing up at their door quite unexpectedly. Her name is Suzanne. I wish to use her real name because my adoption story has already been published and as the adoptees in the study indicated, some of us resent the fact that our names have been changed through provincial child welfare policies.

On that brilliant Sunday morning, Suzanne and I shared more stories about our youth on our drive to St. Adolphe, Manitoba, our first stop, the community where I was raised. My intent was to visit the graveyard where my adoptive parents are buried. I wanted to thank them for the life they gave me through adopting me as their daughter. I was telling Suzanne that I would have liked to have gone to the house where I was raised, but I had not been there in almost 30 years and did not think I could just walk up to the door and knock. You see, my adopted sister still lives in that house.

Our trip to the graveyard had been strategically planned around the time that the people I did not want to run into would be in church, or so I thought. As Suzanne and I walked to my parents' graves, my apprehension grew. When we reached the site and I saw their names, I could not say the words I wanted and asked Suzanne to pray while I wept. She said a beautiful prayer and thanked them for taking good care of me. Finally, I was able to speak, too, and thanked them as well. They really were wonderful parents.

After we visited my parents, we walked back slowly through the graveyard toward my truck. I read the headstones with interest as I knew most of the people and of course, it was another affirmation of my own mortality in a sense. As we were leaving, I looked up and saw someone heading toward my parents' headstones. It was my adopted sister. I told Suzanne who it was, and she said, "Well I think *THAT's* a sign, and you should go talk to her." I told Suzanne I was afraid, and she said, "She looks like she can handle it." I walked toward my other sister and called her name. When she looked up, the sun was in her eyes and as she shaded them with her hand, she looked exactly like my adopted mother. She was as stunned to see me as I was to see her. I walked toward her and embraced her.

After we had a short visit on the spot, she said the words I had hoped to hear. She invited us back to my childhood home. I had told Suzanne about my room, my favorite tree and other pieces of my growing-up years while we were driving. Once we got to the house, I was happy to see that it looked the same as I remembered with the exception of a garage. She kept it very much like my parents would have. For me, that was so comforting.

We sat outside. She told Suzanne stories of my childhood and fond memories of me as a baby and young girl. She had such affection in her voice; that also was comforting. I could not help but think, "What was I hiding from and why did I think I was not welcome here anymore?" Finally, we went into the house and to my complete joy, my old room had not changed either. My sister pulled out a piece of fabric from my old dresser that I immediately recognized as belonging to an old pair of pajamas of mine when I might have been four or five years old. She also showed me my mother's old button pail that amused me to no end on rainy days as a child. I was in heaven with these old treasures. When my sister told me I could have my two favorite buttons, you would think they were diamonds.

Before we left, Suzanne and I sat on the swings that I loved as a child. They are bench swings long enough for two or three people to sit on. As a child, I used to sit in them with my parents on many wonderful summer nights. My sister took a picture of Suzanne and I sitting on those swings. This image was precious since we never had a chance to swing together as children. Before I left, I promised to come back with my daughter and grandson, which I did. I also was blessed to know that my mother kept a

number of my childhood treasures that my sister gave to me before I left Manitoba to come back to Alberta.

On that summer day as Suzanne and I drove away, I said to her, "Well that was a miracle!" She replied, "And that was no coincidence – your parents wanted the two of you to reconnect." I also remembered that July 18 was my father's birthday, which is why my sister went to the graveyard – to pray and wish him happy birthday. I felt like I was the one who received the biggest gift that day. It was the gift of reconciling with my past with and a positive connection to my adoption in a way I had not experienced since my childhood.

I spent the rest of the summer also connecting with my birth family. I have fond memories of the summer of 2004 where I thought I was going to Manitoba to write my dissertation. Creator knew it was to do so much more than that. In order to write about connectedness, I had to experience it myself and come to truly understand what it means to me as an adoptee. These days, I feel pretty lucky, which is what my birth siblings, who were not adopted, have always told me. I know now that my rebellion, my addictions and other painful experiences were not just about me being unlovable, and it was not because my adoptive parents did not love me. My search for myself led me to some dangerous places and now, I have come full circle. I know who I am and where I come from. And, that my friends, is the strength of connectedness.

All my relations.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

PARTCIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDIES IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY.
VOLUNTEERS ARE ASSURED THAT THEY MAY DECLINE TO PARTICIPATE OR WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY AT ANY TIME WITHOUT PREJUDICE.

Title: The Role of Connectedness in the Health of First Nation Adoptees

Conducted by: **Jeannine Carriere**
Doctoral Student, Department of Human Ecology
Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

Advisor: **Dr. Nancy Gibson**
Chair, Human Ecology
Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

This research project hopes to get ideas from First Nation adoptees about their experience with adoption and their health. The study is being done for a university paper called a dissertation, to written by Jeannine Carriere. Jeannine would like to talk with First Nation people who have been adopted.

Jeannine is interested in hearing stories of those who were adopted by non-Aboriginal parents and were raised away from their First Nation communities. By sharing their stories, it will give ideas to those who work in adoptions and help them make good decisions for First Nation children. This includes the staff, Board and Elders for the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency.

If you would like to be in this study, Jeannine can meet with you at your house or another place where it is easy for you to talk. Jeannine will do the interviews and ask you some questions to help you. The interviews will last about an hour and you may need to be interviewed again to make sure Jeannine has all the information right. The second interview may not take as long.

Your name will not be used in the study, but you can choose a name you like and it will be attached to a number, and Jeannine will know it's your story. With your permission, Jeannine will take notes while you are talking to help her remember things about the interview. The interviews will be recorded on tape and the tapes, with notes, will be locked up. Only Jeannine and Dr. Gibson will be able to look at the files. The tapes will only be kept while the study is being done and then will be destroyed.

Participating in this project will not harm you but if you have feelings which come up during the interviews, and would like to talk to someone, Jeannine can help with this by giving you names and places to go for help. The benefit of being in this study is to help in the area of First Nation adoption. As it's stated at the top of this page, you are free to withdraw from the research at any time. If you choose to stop being part of the study, your information cannot be used.

If you have further questions, you can call Jeannine Carriere at:

* The readability score for this information sheet is grade 8.

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM - PARTICIPANTS

Title: The Role of Connectedness in the Health of First Nation Adoptees

Principal Investigator: **Dr. Nancy Gibson**
Chair, Department of Human Ecology
Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

Co-Investigator: **Jeannine Carriere**
Department of Human Ecology
Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

** As stated on the information sheet, the information you provide will be used for a university paper called a dissertation to be completed by Jeannine Carriere.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Please circle your answers:

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	Yes	No
Have you received and read an Information Sheet about the study?	Yes	No
Do you understand the risk and benefits of taking part in the study?	Yes	No
Have you had a chance to ask questions and talk about the study?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you can leave the study at any time?	Yes	No
Has the researcher explained how personal information will be handled?	Yes	No
Do you know what the information you give will be used for?	Yes	No

The study was explained to me by: _____

I agree to take part in the study and I understand what the study is about.

_____ _____
Signature of Research Participant Printed Name

Date: _____ Witness: _____

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntary agrees to participate

_____
Signature of Researcher

APPENDIX C: KEY INFORMANT INFORMATION SHEET

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDIES IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY.
VOLUNTEERS ARE ASSURED THAT THEY MAY DECLINE TO PARTICIPATE OR WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY AT ANY TIME WITHOUT PREJUDICE

Title: The Role of Connectedness in the Health of First Nation Adoptees

Conducted by: **Jeannine Carriere**
Doctoral Student, Department of Human Ecology
Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

Advisor: **Dr. Nancy Gibson**
Chair, Department of Human Ecology
Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

This research project hopes to get ideas from First Nation adoptees and people working in adoption programs for First Nation children. The study is being done for a university paper called a dissertation. Jeannine Carriere is hoping to meet with a group of people, who have experience in adoption. The meetings will be held as focus groups or talking circles. By sharing their ideas, the circle members can help to develop questions for adoptees being interviewed and to bring other ideas around what is needed for First Nation adoptions. Circle members will include YTSA Elders, staff and some adoptive parents and will be about ten to twelve people at most.

If you would like to take part in these focus groups, or talking circles, you will be invited to attend. The meetings will last two hours at most, giving everyone a chance to talk. The meetings will be recorded on tape, and you will be asked to sign a consent form. The tapes will be locked up and only Jeannine Carriere and Dr. Gibson will be able to use them. The tapes will be kept until the end of the study and then will be destroyed. Jeannine will lead the circles and ask one of the Elders to open and close with a prayer. Some questions will be put on a flip chart to help people in the circle think about what they want to say. There will be another circle at the end of the research study to go over what was said and make sure it was recorded in the right way.

Names will not be used in the study but numbers will be assigned to each person. With your permission, Jeannine will take notes during the circle discussions to help her remember things about the talks.

Being part of these circles will not harm you but if you need to talk to someone about feelings which came up during the circle, or focus group, Jeannine can help by giving you names and places to go for this help The benefits of being in this study is a chance to help in the area of adoption for First Nation children and families. As it's stated at the top of this page, you are free to withdraw from the research at any time. If you choose to leave the focus group or circle, your information may not be used.

If you have further questions about this study, please call Jeannine Carriere at:

*The readability level for this information sheet is grade 8.

Appendix D: Key Informant Consent Form

Title: The Role of Connectedness in the Health of First Nation Adoptees

Principal Investigator: **Dr. Nancy Gibson**
Chair, Department of Human Ecology
Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics
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Edmonton, Alberta

Co-Investigator: **Jeannine Carriere**
Department of Human Ecology
Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

** As stated on the Information Sheet, the information you provide will be used for a university paper called a dissertation to be completed by Jeannine Carriere.

KEY INFORMANT CONSENT

Please Circle Your Answers:

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	Yes	No
Have you received an Information Sheet about the study?	Yes	No
Do you understand the risks and benefits of participating in the study?	Yes	No
Have you had a chance to ask questions and talk about the study?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you can leave the study at any time?	Yes	No
Has the researcher explained how personal information will be handled?	Yes	No
Do you know what the information will be used for?	Yes	No

The study was explained to me by: _____

I agree to take part in the study and I understand what the study is about.

_____ _____
Signature of Research Key Informant Printed Name

Date: _____ Witness: _____

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntary agrees to participate

_____
Signature of Researcher (readability grade 8.3)

APPENDIX E:

Preliminary Research Results Shared at Circle Two on February 18, 2004

Preliminary Results
Eighteen First Nation adoptees were interviewed for this study. Some demographics are as follows: • 16 females and 4 males • Between ages 21 to 50 • Geography: 2 Alberta, 2 British Columbia, 6 Manitoba, 8 Ontario • Most (16) adopted in Sixties Scoop • Two in long-term foster care or custom adoption
Age at time of adoption: • Under age 1: 8 • Ages 1-1.5: 4 • Ages 2-3: 3 • Ages 7-9: 3
Background of adoptive family: • 15 were placed within Caucasian families – 4 of whom were Mennonite • 3 were in First Nation families
Experiences in adoptive families: • alcohol abuse – 7 of them had alcoholic adoptive fathers • fostering other children – 12 • conflict with adoptive father: 3 out of 4 males • conflict with adoptive mother: 9 out of 14 females • supportive of reunion – 6
Experiences with Birth Family: • Happy to meet them • Distanced from them afterward and resentment from this • Guilt • Confusion over two families • Alcohol and addiction issues with birth parents: 16

Preliminary Results

General Health Issues with Participants:

- anxiety attacks or disorder: 6
- stomach ailments: 4
- eating disorders: 4
- suicide attempts or ideation: 8
- back problems: 2
- addiction or past addictions: 13
- skin problems – rashes, eczema: 3

Search issues:

- found adoption papers: 2
- registry: 2
- repatriation program: 8
- contact through another means (i.e., community agencies or relatives): 6

Emotional Health Issues:

- anger – almost all expressed this as common growing up
- fear of rejection and living in a state of fear
- abandonment
- not affectionate and afraid of it
- multiple relationships and problems with spouses or partners
- depression – (high incidence)
- over-achiever and need to please: almost half expressed this

Most significant losses:

- Identity
- language
- culture
- health information
- belonging

Recommendations:

- Open adoption to ensure information is provided, especially around health issues
- Registry should be expanded for all extended family
- Cultural exposure should be compulsory
- Plans in place to keep kids connected
- Adoption in Aboriginal home for Aboriginal kids (15 out of 18)
- Support groups for adoptees
- Assistance with search

APPENDIX F : SAMPLE OF INITIAL, SECONDARY AND FINAL SORTING IN CATEGORY OF ADOPTIVE FAMILY

Initial Sorting and Open Coding

Initial coding was a review of transcripts to examine all what seemed important. Whole lines of transcripts were shaded and examined for main themes. For example, there was a lengthy discussion about adoptive family. This emerged into a category of *Adoptive Family.*

Category: Adoptive Family

Secondary Sorting

*This involved reviewing all that was said about adoptive families to identify all sub-categories during a final sort. This was pursued by using short descriptions or parts of sentences in each transcript. For example:

1. Other adopted and foster children in the home
2. Personality conflicts with mother
3. Differences in treatment by parents
4. Frightened of them
5. Good decent hard working
6. Adoptive parents strict but loving
7. Had to work at relationship
8. Adoptive parents still helpful
9. Abuse better than no family at all
10. Fighting with father
11. Supportive of reunions
12. Adoptive parents offered to help find birth family

Axial Coding

Using the category of *adoptive family*, transcripts were reviewed again to identify sub-categories under this category. Clusters of events or environmental conditions associated with the adoptive family developed into sub-categories. These were the final sub-categories:

1. Age
2. Caregiving environment
3. Custom adoption
4. Long term foster care
5. Conflicts
6. Abuse
7. Stability
8. Search Process
9. Reactions to Search